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**Franz Liszt 1811-1886:**  
**Putting the Virtue into Virtuosity**

By

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To

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## **Abstract**

Nowadays when most people think of Franz Liszt it is as a virtuoso pianist who composed primarily piano music. Much of his other work and compositional effort has been completely obscured by his revolutionary way of playing and writing for the piano. This thesis aims to present an alternative view of Liszt as an artist who saw music as a means to do some good in the world. The introduction places Liszt within the social context of his life, describing attitudes to virtuosity at the start of his career and showing how the development of the piano and other nineteenth century technological advances facilitated the creation of his enormous reputation. The following five chapters explore Liszt's religious and moral beliefs and how these were instrumental in his efforts to further the careers and improve the lives of others.

Chapter 1 explores Liszt's upbringing, his religious faith and early ambitions. His moral code is examined along with the principles that he adopted and by which he conducted himself in adulthood.

Chapter 2 examines the support Liszt provided for Wagner, covering direct financial help, acquisition of patronage, political assistance in the matter of Wagner's exile, and musical support through performances of Wagner's works.

Chapter 3 describes Liszt's relationship with Hungary, and with Budapest in particular. Liszt's efforts to raise money for relief of victims of the floods in Pest are mentioned. His role in the establishment of the Conservatory is outlined in more detail along with his continuing involvement.

Chapter 4 discusses Liszt's teaching methods, the students he attracted from around the world and the way they spread his message.

Chapter 5 considers some examples of how Liszt was exploited and taken for granted by some of those who perhaps ought to have been more appreciative, and how Liszt dealt with these problems.

The thesis concludes that much of Liszt's musical activity, especially his unpaid work, has been largely obscured by his relatively short career as a professional pianist.

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## **Introduction**

### **Aims of this Essay: Background**

Franz Liszt (1811-1886) lived a significantly longer life than many of his musical contemporaries and was an active force in European music for well over sixty years. His life can be divided into three main sections: his career as a solo pianist, from early childhood till his withdrawal from the professional circuit in 1847; as Kapellmeister in Weimar from 1848 till 1861; and his latter years when he firstly took minor orders within the Catholic Church, then divided his time between teaching and quiet retreat until his death in 1886. Throughout all the phases of his life he composed music, striving to push the boundaries in his virtuoso piano music, experimenting with avant-garde ideas and eventually trying to dispense with tonality altogether. These are the best-known aspects of Liszt's musical endeavours.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how and why Liszt synthesised his religious, social and musical beliefs into an overall vision of the role of music and the musician within society, and to investigate how virtuosity was integral to the development of his vision. By highlighting a few of the many facets of Liszt's life, I will try to demonstrate how he attempted to implement this vision through his career. The final section will assess whether or not Liszt succeeded in communicating his idea to the world at large, and how much of this vision has been absorbed into today's musical world.

There is a huge library of literature relating to Liszt, some of which has itself been coloured by the myths and distortions that grew up around him during his lifetime. Alan Walker's three-volume biography of Liszt does much to separate fact from fiction and plays a major part in the writing of this study, together with contemporary sources, Liszt's own writings and many other materials.

The nineteenth century was a time of major technological development and political and social change affecting all aspects of life. These changes were as important for Liszt as they were for all those around him and made a major contribution to the phenomenal success he enjoyed throughout his career as well as colouring his attitudes and beliefs.

This introduction attempts to place Liszt in the context of his time by examining the main musical frameworks that were in place at the start of his career and which changed and developed during his lifetime to affect, and be affected by, the extent of his fame and the way he tried to pursue his ideals.

### **Virtuosity**

"Virtuosity: late 15c., "manly qualities," from M.L. *virtuositas*, from L.L. *virtuosus* (see *virtuoso*). As "skill or abilities of a virtuoso", 1670s, from *virtuoso* + *-ity*."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Online Etymological Dictionary*; Virtuosity

The word “virtuosity” has come to mean an outstanding technical display by an expert in the field, but its use is also tinged with an element of vulgarity and lack of taste or refinement. This usage can be traced at least as far back as post-revolutionary Paris when entertainments which had been the preserve of the wealthy minority were finding favour with the general public. This paved the way for public displays of virtuosity – not just in music but in such diverse activities as chess, cookery and acrobatics. Virtuosi used any means at their disposal to publicise their events and they now had the ability to advertise in the press and by displaying posters. The extravagance and public appreciation of such displays encouraged ever more elaborate efforts while the artistic community tended to look down on the virtuoso, and even the term “virtuoso” was used to denote a performer or a composition that had little or no real artistic merit.<sup>2</sup>

By the time the Liszt family settled in Paris in 1823, the virtuoso culture was in full swing but

... empty virtuosity, with its shallow taste, which was just then in full play, and had begun to exercise over the public a supremacy which pushed everything that was noble and significative in art into the shade, did not correspond with his [Adam Liszt’s] feeling, which stood on a much higher level.<sup>3</sup>

This allegedly explains Adam Liszt’s choices of teachers for his son, wishing to concentrate on artistic rather than virtuosic development. Instrumental virtuosity had

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<[http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed\\_in\\_frame=0&search=virtuosity&searchmode=none](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=virtuosity&searchmode=none)> [accessed 12 December 2011].

<sup>2</sup> Paul Metzner, *Crescendo of the Virtuoso* (University of California Press, 1998), pp. 1-6.

<sup>3</sup> Lina Ramann, *Franz Liszt, Artist and Man* (W.H. Allen & Co, 1882), Vol. 1, p. 54.



developed from violin technique around 1700, when Stradivari brought the instrument to what is still considered to be an unsurpassed peak of perfection. Concertos written around this time began to use passage-work figures (normally only used as embellishment) as part of the main material of the work.<sup>4</sup> Composition at this time frequently employed the continuo method, which left considerable freedom to the performer to add to a basic framework of bass and harmonic outline. Improvisational skill and technical prowess were thus the forces behind the development of virtuosity, and initially rondos and variations were the principal forms used for virtuosic display.<sup>5</sup>

By the time the piano was sufficiently well established for pianists to be able to adopt virtuosity, thematic composition was finding favour, and opera proved to be a rich source of material for pianistic improvisation. The operatic fantasy became popular, often consisting of medleys of popular themes from opera, with little musical coherence – melodies were linked seemingly at random and may not have even originally been written by the same composer. Most of these efforts were never actually written down as the core of the virtuoso's performance consisted of improvisation.

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<sup>4</sup> Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music* (University of California Press, 1989), p. 135.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

## **Virtue**

Virtue: early 13c., “moral life and conduct, moral excellence,” *vertu*, from Anglo-Fr. And O.Fr. *vertu*, from L. *virtutem* (nom. *Virtus*) “moral strength, manliness, valor, excellence, worth,” from *vir* “man” (see *virile*). Phrase *by virtue of* (early 13c.) preserves alternative M.E. sense of “efficacy”. Wyclif Bible has *virtue* where K.J.V. uses *power*. The *seven cardinal virtues* (early 14c.) were divided into the natural (justice, prudence, temperance, fortitude) and the theological (hope, faith, charity).<sup>6</sup>

The usage of the word “virtue” has altered little over the years, probably in large part due to its religious connotations. However, although both terms originate from the same Latin root, it is not a word that is used naturally in connection with the career of an early nineteenth-century virtuoso, who was seen as a self-seeking showman who established himself through extravagant, and possibly vulgar, public performance.

Most people care about those less fortunate than themselves and this was as true in the nineteenth century as it is today. Liszt’s admirers were not only the audiences who heard him in person, but included those who merely read about him in the papers and journals. His charity fundraising efforts probably contributed to some extent towards the public’s affection for him.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Online Etymological Dictionary*; Virtue  
 <[http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed\\_in\\_frame=0&search=virtue&searchmode=none](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=virtue&searchmode=none)>  
 [accessed 12 December 2011].

<sup>7</sup> Dana Gooley, *The Virtuoso Liszt* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 4.

### **Politics and the Catholic Church**

In the aftermath of the American War of Independence (1775) and the French Revolution (1789) a new desire for democracy arose. Various confrontations took place in different parts of Europe in the early nineteenth century as ordinary people began to feel they had a right to participate in government. The Trade Union movement, which began in Britain and America in the late eighteenth century, spread across Europe in the nineteenth century. Unions were outlawed in many countries as the upper classes attempted to defend their position as rulers and uprisings were an effort by working classes to overturn these laws and gain recognition for their democratic rights.

At the same time there was a feeling that the Catholic Church ought to relinquish its role in government and become a purely religious organisation. As will be seen later, Liszt was in favour of democracy, though he abstained from direct political involvement.

### **Performance Practices in the Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

Musical events in Liszt's time were very different from those we have today. The solo instrumentalist or virtuoso had three main types of platform. Firstly, private concerts were given in the homes of music-lovers. Secondly, they played in the salons of the nobility, normally to a specially invited audience. Thirdly, they could play to the general public either during the intervals of a theatrical show (an opera, a play or a

ballet) or in a mixed programme along with other performers. Audiences did not behave as they do today either. Applause could erupt at any time during a performance if some technical feat was exciting enough. It was also not uncommon for people to chat and move around during the concert, and this included performers mingling with the audience between items.<sup>8</sup>

Attitudes to the score were flexible. The composer's work was seen as a template, or starting point, and the virtuoso would "improve" it with his own version, so the focus was on the individual virtuosic strengths of the performer rather than on the composition itself (a focus that would change as the nineteenth century progressed).<sup>9</sup> A flavour of some of this can be felt in three recordings by the late, great, Vladimir Horowitz: his own Fantasy on Bizet's "Carmen"<sup>10</sup>; his own arrangement of "The Stars and Stripes Forever"<sup>11</sup>; and his performance of Tausig's arrangement of the "March Militaire" by Schubert, originally written for four hands.<sup>12</sup>

### **Development of the Piano**

The nineteenth century saw the transition from early pianos to the modern concert instrument. In 1825 the first metal plate was patented for the square piano (by Alpheus Babcock in Boston) enabling higher string tensions to be achieved, resulting

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<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Hamilton, *After the Golden Age* (Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 36-40.

<sup>9</sup> Dahlhaus, p. 138.

<sup>10</sup> Bizet-Horowitz, *Variations on a Theme from "Carmen"*, Vladimir Horowitz (Piano), CD, RCA GD87755 (1990)

<sup>11</sup> Sousa-Horowitz, *The Stars and Stripes Forever*, Vladimir Horowitz (Piano), CD, RCA GD87755 (1990)

<sup>12</sup> Schubert-Tausig, *Military March in D♭ Major*, Vladimir Horowitz (Piano), Audio Tape, Deutsche Grammophon 419 217-4 (1986)

in a more powerful sound and helping the instrument stay in tune for longer. As string tension in the upper register of the instrument had limited its compass to six and a half octaves, this new plate also enabled the compass to increase to seven octaves.

Although some problems were at least partially addressed, new problems arose with the quality of the sound and noises emanating from the tuning pins within the plate.

By 1859 Henry Steinway had resolved these difficulties, and in addition had worked out how to overstring a grand piano. Overstringing fulfils three primary functions: it helps increase the resonance of the soundboard by altering the bridge position; it permits longer strings to be employed in the bass register thus producing more power; and it helps reduce sympathetic vibration between the strings by allowing them to be slightly further apart.

In 1821 the double-escapement system was invented by Sebastien Erard. Performers were now able to execute more rapid repetition of notes and experienced great improvement in the responsiveness of the action. Henry Steinway incorporated this technology into his instruments and his 1859 grand pianos are essentially the same as the instruments produced today. Steinway's basic design has since been adopted by all piano manufacturers.<sup>13</sup> Thus by the time Liszt began his career, the piano was almost fully developed and the time was right for somebody to explore its full potential.

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<sup>13</sup> Richard K. Lieberman, *Steinway & Sons* (Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 26-29.

## **A Wider Audience**

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw huge changes in production methods with a shift from manual to mechanised labour. There was a consequent influx of people from rural areas into cities where, with this combination of emerging democracy and new entrepreneurial possibilities, people saw opportunities for vast improvement in quality of life and the means to acquire wealth. City dwellers were also hungry for new entertainment experiences. Paul Metzner quotes the population of Paris as rising from 550,000 in 1800 to 1.3 million by 1851<sup>14</sup> which more than doubled the potential audience numbers.

From early beginnings in the 1830s, the world as a whole began to see the huge potential of railways both for cargo and passenger transport. Rail networks were developed across Europe and in America<sup>15</sup> and the consequent easing of travel difficulties opened up new possibilities for the touring performer. The use of the developing rail network for newspaper distribution resulted in wider distribution and, as a consequence, regular publicity for performers over a larger area. By the 1840s, advances in telegraph technology were revolutionising communications in general and journalism in particular.<sup>16</sup> Again, this allowed publicity to expand with great speed over a wide area. Performers such as Liszt now had opportunities to become extremely well-known throughout Europe and beyond.

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<sup>14</sup> Metzner, p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Fifteenth Edition, 1982, Macropaedia, Vol. 15, pp.478-481.

<sup>16</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Macropaedia, Vol 18, pp. 67-71.

Touring was not a new idea, but these developments greatly increased the number of touring virtuosi as they could access new audiences more easily, and their visits could benefit from more extensive advance publicity. In the case of Liszt, the piano maker Érard made an instrument available for him wherever he travelled.<sup>17</sup> In addition to ensuring that Liszt had a suitable piano to use, this celebrity endorsement certainly did not harm the manufacturer's reputation.

### **Summary**

Liszt was ideally situated to take advantage of what the new nineteenth century technologies had to offer. He took full advantage of the huge improvements in the design of pianos when devising his “Transcendental” style, which is the area he is primarily remembered for nowadays. As the railway network developed and the difficulties of travel eased, he was able to journey further and more frequently; it became a matter of course for him to divide his time between Weimar, Rome, Paris, Budapest and Bayreuth in his latter years. As a young man he toured extensively in Europe playing concerts, even venturing as far as St Petersburg and London.

As journalism expanded and the telegraph system began to speed communication, the general public became hungry for news of events far from home. Liszt, being renowned in Europe, became a celebrity in Britain, where he did visit, and America, where he never went. All his activities were reported (and some scandalous fictions

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<sup>17</sup> Metzner, p. 14.

were published as well) and he became one of the first global superstars in a way that is still recognised today.

Liszt was undoubtedly a showman, tossing his trademark mane of hair and indulging in extravagant movement and facial expressions while performing feats of extreme virtuosity. This thesis attempts to show that behind his extrovert public image Liszt had an underlying vision of music as having a more elusive power to influence which could be of benefit to the world, and to examine various ways in which Liszt used this vision and tried to communicate it to others.



## **Chapter 1**

### **Formation of a Synthesis**

Many people still think of Liszt as a pianistic showman who wrote lots of notes, very fast and very loud but with little artistic merit in his compositions. His career as a virtuoso is seen as seeking applause and financial gain. He is considered responsible for reshaping piano technique and thereby encouraging the development of the modern piano to cope with the demands. His private life is said to have been scandalous with numerous affairs and much riotous living.

Much of this is true, but much is almost certainly not, so some explanation is needed to reconcile this image with the man who in later life took Holy orders.

This chapter examines Liszt's early influences, the formation of the religious and moral codes that shaped his future, and the degree to which he synthesised these beliefs into a template for the ongoing role of music.

### **Religious and Moral Foundations**

Franciscus Liszt was born on 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1811 in Raiding, Hungary. His baptismal name, Franciscus, was given to him in honour of the Franciscan Order and his godfather, Franciscus Zambothy.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Walker, *Franz Liszt* (Cornell University Press, 1987), Vol. 1, p. 56.

As a child, Liszt developed a strong religious faith. His father, Adam, was a devout Catholic who at one stage in his early adult life had become a novice with the Franciscan Order in a monastery near Pressburg. However, he did not complete his training for the priesthood and returned to secular living after two years. Adam Liszt made sure his son was well-educated in religious matters, and the child developed a deep faith in the compassion of God and a belief in an after-life.

The family left Hungary in 1821 and settled in Vienna where young Liszt was taught by Czerny and Salieri till the Liszts moved to Paris in 1823. While living in Vienna, Liszt performed many times, primarily for the nobility who were enthralled by him. In December 1822 he played publicly to great acclaim:

Again a young virtuoso, fallen, as it were, from the clouds, and hurrying us along to the highest admiration. The performance of this boy, for his age, borders on the incredible..... (Allgemeine Musik Zeitung Jan 1823) <sup>2</sup>

The world beyond Vienna was becoming aware of Liszt and similar reports of his genius followed as he made his way to Paris in 1823, playing various concerts on the way. The trip to Paris was undertaken primarily to enrol Liszt as a student in the Conservatory under the direction of Cherubini, but as he was not a French national, his acceptance there was prohibited.

Rather than becoming submerged in the cloistered atmosphere of the Conservatory, which did not permit its students to perform, Liszt was launched into the Paris salons,

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<sup>2</sup> Ramann, Vol. 1, p. 68.

playing for the aristocracy and royalty. They adored him and he was quickly given the pet name “Little Litz [*sic*]”<sup>3</sup> and was hailed by some as a reincarnation of Mozart.

### **Two Humiliations**

By 1825 Liszt was verging on adolescence. Despite his growing up he was still “Little Litz” and he was becoming increasingly upset by this label – he felt ready to be viewed, both personally and artistically, as a young adult.<sup>4</sup>

A crisis seems to have occurred in October 1825 when, after the successful debut of Liszt’s operetta *Don Sancho*, the principal tenor Adolf Nourrit picked Liszt up and carried him like a child, or a pet puppy, for the audience to fuss over. Liszt was dreadfully angered and upset by this, as any fourteen-year-old would be.<sup>5</sup> He became withdrawn and turned to Christian writings for comfort. His disillusionment was so profound that he wished to turn his back on his musical career and longed to enter a seminary himself so he could enter the priesthood and die a martyr’s death. His father persuaded him to follow his musical vocation: ‘The path of the true artist does not lead away from religion – it is possible to have one path for both. Love God, be good and upright, so that you will reach ever higher in your art.’<sup>6</sup>

An unpublished diary held in the Bayreuth Archive reflects his 15-year-old maxims:

Wasting time is one of the worst faults in the world. Life is so short, every moment is so precious; yet we live as if life will never end. God sees me and I

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<sup>3</sup> Ramann, Vol. 1, p. 89.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 125-126.

<sup>6</sup> Walker, *Franz Liszt*, Vol. 1, p. 117.

could offend him in his presence. Am I capable of preferring to please a man, rather than God? There are few things which are impossible in themselves. We lack merely the application, not the means, to make them succeed.<sup>7</sup>

Here the adolescent Liszt shows the basis of the self-imposed code which he tried to adhere to for the remainder of his professional career. His appetite for diligence, his wish to overcome his own shortcomings and his devotion to God are clearly and concisely stated, though not yet fully mature.

After his father's death in 1827 Liszt set out to earn a living in Paris as a teacher. One of his first pupils was the 17-year-old Caroline Saint-Cricq, daughter of the Minister of the Interior, the aristocratic Count Saint-Cricq. Following the death of her mother she was less closely chaperoned and over a period of several months an attachment grew and intensified between her and Liszt. Eventually her father became aware of this. As was expected from one of his status, he quickly told Liszt that the difference in rank made it impossible for any relationship to continue between a mere piano teacher and his only daughter. Liszt withdrew with as much dignity as he could.

He was deeply wounded not only by his separation from Caroline but also by being made to feel second-rate and unworthy, and yet again his disillusionment with the world turned his thoughts to religion. He fell into a deep depression, visited his confessor daily and withdrew so far from his normal life for so long that reports of his death appeared in the press. Alan Walker mentions several sources where Liszt tells

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 117.

of his illness, saying that it went on for two years.<sup>8</sup> His friend, the writer Wilhelm von Lenz wrote of Liszt at this time: ‘His desire to become a priest came from the innermost core of his being. It was thematic.’<sup>9</sup> In the absence of his father, this time it fell to his mother and his confessor to try to dissuade him.

It took the Paris revolution of July 1830 to rouse him and enable him to resume his life properly. The people of Paris had become increasingly concerned that Charles X would abolish the hard-won constitution and reinstate the “divine right of Kings”, and in July 1830 violence erupted. The causes being fought for were in sympathy with the hurt that Liszt had received, and he immediately began composing a Revolutionary Symphony in which the Marseillaise featured prominently. The work was not completed, and most of it is now lost,<sup>10</sup> but it appears the effort he put into it was therapeutic.

It is perhaps significant that in the face of what he saw as injustice, humiliation and complete lack of respect, Liszt looked towards a priestly or monastic existence. This was an environment where social status and wealth should not be the symbols of worthiness. Here a man ought to be enabled to earn respect on the basis of merit rather than birth.

### **The Twin Influences of Paganini**

By the time Paganini gave his first concerts in Paris in 1831 he had already gained fame and notoriety. He was an immediate sensation and made a return visit the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 132 *n*.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Merrick, *Revolution and Religion in the Music of Liszt* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 4.

following year, when Liszt heard him for the first time. The effect of Paganini on Liszt was immediate and life-changing in two significant ways. Liszt was both enthralled and appalled: enthralled by the technical prowess which had suddenly allowed him to visualise so many new possibilities for music, and music for the piano in particular, though later he became appalled by Paganini as a man, clearly consumed by selfishness and greed.

The immediate effect on Liszt was to show him a new direction in music and he stopped playing in public until he could assimilate and develop all the ideas that had suddenly burst into his awareness. He began to see virtuosity as a way of extending the intensity of expressiveness in music and spent hours at his piano every day perfecting new techniques and incorporating them into his compositions. His enthusiasm can be felt in a letter to Pierre Wolff:

For the past fortnight my mind and fingers have been working away like two lost spirits.....I spend 4 to 5 hours practising exercises (thirds, sixths, octaves, tremolos, repeated notes, cadenzas, etc. etc.). Ah! Provided I don't go mad you will find an artist in me!. Yes, an artist such as you desire, such as is required nowadays!<sup>11</sup>

At the heart of this effort can now be seen the application of the maxims, quoted above, which appeared in his teenage diary. This concentrated practice gave him a sureness of technique and execution that had never been heard before from a pianist. Liszt also studied Paganini's compositions and worked out how to adapt his

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<sup>11</sup> Franz Liszt, *Selected Letters* (Clarendon Press 1998), p. 7.

techniques for the piano, ultimately resulting in the six *Grandes Études de Paganini* and Liszt's other "transcendental" piano works. The other result was, of course, his unprecedented success when he resumed his career as a touring professional.

The second major influence Paganini had on Liszt developed after his first enthusiasm had subsided. Paganini's reputation for gambling, drinking and womanising was well publicised. He openly boasted about not practising between concerts and had on some occasions pawned his violin in order to pay off gambling debts. Liszt certainly felt that regardless of the man's talents, this behaviour was disrespectful to the audiences, music in general, and the gifts Paganini had been given by God. He began to be dominated by the idea that 'artistic culture is inseparable from human sympathies, that only a great man can become a great artist'.<sup>12</sup> Liszt's essay, written just after Paganini's death in 1840, gives a powerful illustration of his feelings, though there is also a suggestion that his polemic is tinged with pity:

....this man before whom they shouted so enthusiastically, passed by the multitude, without associating with them. No one knew the sentiments which moved his heart; the golden ray of his life gilded no other existence; no communication of thought and feeling bound him to his brethren. He remained a stranger to every affection, to every passion, a stranger even to his own genius; for what is genius else than a priestly power, revealing God to the human soul? And Paganini's god has never been other than his own gloomy,

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<sup>12</sup> Ramann, Vol..1, p. 260.

mournful self. ... am I not authorised in describing the end and aim of Paganini as a narrow egotism?<sup>13</sup>

These two aspects of Paganini's influence on Liszt changed the course of his life, the future of pianism, and had a long-reaching effect on music in general. Liszt has managed to develop the pianistic tools enabling him to incorporate virtuosity into art and thus express his own compositional ideas in the style he called "transcendental". This style maximises the technical and expressive potential of the instrument in an effort to create a more spiritual experience for the listener and was Liszt's direct response to his ambivalence to Paganini. The writer Honoré de Balzac describes this style as 'the sort of magic practised by Paganini and Liszt, in which performance indeed changes all the conditions of music, while making out of it a kind of poetry beyond music'.<sup>14</sup>

### **St Simonism and Abbé Lamennais**

In October of 1830, the same year as the July revolution and at the height of his distaste for the world, Liszt discovered that the ideals of Saint-Simonism, in trying to reconcile socialism and Christianity and placing artists in a leading role within reform, were close to his own youthful ideals and he began attending their meetings until the cult was broken up. He did not, however, become a full member.

In April 1834 Liszt met Abbé Félicité de Lamennais and spent the summer of 1834 with him in La Chênaie. Liszt had been deeply moved by Lamennais' *Paroles d'un Croyant* published in 1834, and wrote to the author:

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 271-273.

<sup>14</sup> Metzner, p. 156.



Do I need to tell you that not a day passes in this populous desert where I am consumed by boredom and vexation, but the memory of you does not come into my heart like a reviving balm, a powerful solace?<sup>15</sup>

Its quasi-biblical language and use of parables to suggest that revolution was required in government, society and the Church in order to obtain justice for all, makes this book rather uncomfortable reading today. However, in the context of the drive for democracy in the nineteenth century it is not difficult to understand how an impressionable, disillusioned, religious young man found much to contemplate in it, especially as revolution was taking place all around him. It is said that even towards the end of his life Liszt could quote large passages from this book from memory, so it obviously made a deep and lasting impression on him: ‘So long as you shall be disunited, and that each thinks but of himself, you have nothing to expect but suffering, and misery, and oppression.’<sup>16</sup> ; ‘God hath commanded all men to labour, and each has a task, whether of body or mind; and those who say, I shall never labour, these are the most wretched.’<sup>17</sup>

One of the most inflammatory ideas for its time was when Lamennais mentioned the bond between Church and State, hinting of corruption within the Church and tacitly advocating separation of the two:

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<sup>15</sup> Merrick, p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> Abbé Félicité de Lamennais, *Words of a Believer* (Cowen Tracts 1846 and Newcastle University), p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Lamennais, p. 7.

And in a chamber hung with black, and lighted with a reddish lamp, seven men clothed in purple, each wearing upon his head a crown, were seated upon seven seats of iron. ... 'Let us gain over to us the ministers of Christ with wealth, and honour and power. And they will command the people, on the part of Christ, to be subject to us in all things, whatever we may do, whatsoever we may ordain. And the people will believe them, and they will obey by conscience, and our power will be stronger than heretofore.'<sup>18</sup>

By 1870 the Catholic Church did relinquish secular power and thereafter exercised only spiritual authority.<sup>19</sup> Despite resulting in Lamennais' suspension from the Church (although he was never actually excommunicated) the book remained a great favourite of Liszt's throughout his life. He and Lamennais became close friends and the initial visit of 1834 seems to have helped Liszt to crystallise his own thoughts into a coherent vision. As Liszt said: 'I have yet to hear him say: I. Always Christ, always sacrifice for others and the voluntary acceptance of opprobrium, of scorn, of misery and death.'<sup>20</sup> Lamennais' teaching that the role of art and the artist was as a manifestation of God bringing beauty to humanity became fundamental to Liszt. This view was expressed more formally, and publicly, by Liszt himself in 1840 when he wrote an obituary in the *Gazette Musicale* following the death of Paganini:

May the artist of the future gladly and readily decline to play the conceited and egotistical role which we hope has had in Paganini its last brilliant representative. May he set his goal within, and not outside, himself, and be the means of virtuosity, and not its end. May he constantly keep in mind that,

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<sup>18</sup> Lamennais, pp. 15, 17.

<sup>19</sup> Merrick, p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> Walker, *Franz Liszt*, Vol. 1, p. 157.

though the saying is *Noblesse oblige!*, in a far higher degree than nobility –  
*Génie oblige!*<sup>21</sup>

Through his association with Lamennais, his own religious faith, the inspiration and disgust he experienced by studying Paganini and his desire for justice and equal opportunity, Liszt now appears to have arrived at synthesis: Genius is a gift from God and an artist's obligation is to use this gift in the service of God and humanity. This maxim remained with Liszt and influenced most of his actions for the remainder of his life.

### **Liszt on Tour**

Liszt's touring concert career is legendary. The number of concerts he played from 1839-47 is unknown, but a rough estimate runs to over one thousand, and he covered huge areas of Europe from Britain to Russia. Many concerts were given in aid of charity and Liszt personally donated his own money to good causes, although with changing currencies and constantly fluctuating exchange rates, it is now impossible to estimate the total amount he raised.

Although Liszt was devoted to music in general, and in particular the piano, he found his career as a touring performer deeply unsatisfactory because of the attitude of his audiences and what he saw as the superficiality of art in general. He summed up his feelings in a long letter to George Sand in April 1837. The full text can be found in

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<sup>21</sup> Walker, *Franz Liszt*, Vol. 1, p. 177.

Lina Ramann's biography,<sup>22</sup> but the following two extracts should suffice to indicate his general unhappiness:

The artist of the present day lives outside the pale of social communion, or the poetic – that is, the religious – element of humanity has vanished from our modern states.

Whom meet we, for the most part in our days? Sculptors? No, manufacturers of statues. Painters? No, manufacturers of pictures. Musicians? No, manufacturers of music – everywhere handicraftsmen and nowhere *artists*. And herefrom arise cruel tortures for him who is born with the pride and the wild independence of a genuine child of art.<sup>23</sup>

These complaints are consistent with the grief and frustration he had felt as a result of the incidents in his early life, described above, and not in tune with his newer beliefs about the role of music and the musician.

After the break-up of his relationship with Marie d'Agoult in 1844, Liszt continued to perform in order to provide long-term financial security for their three children and for his own mother. (Marie was accepted back into her family only on condition that she left the children behind.) When Liszt retired from the professional concert circuit in 1847, he never again played in public for his own profit – all proceeds were

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<sup>22</sup> Ramann, Vol. 2, pp.256-265.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 258.

donated to some charitable cause.<sup>24</sup> He then took up a post as Kapellmeister in Weimar with a small stipend attached.

### **Continuing Religious Faith**

Liszt's religious faith remained strong throughout his life. Even a cursory glance through some of his letters will demonstrate how his life was centred on the church calendar and his beliefs. The examples are too numerous to quote, but the following is a representative sample:

On Sunday morning (yesterday), on opening my Bible, at Mass, I came across this verse: 'God is our refuge, our strength and our help in distress, and extremely easy to find' – 'therefore will we not fear...' – that is sublime too! (To Marie d'Agoult, September 1833)<sup>25</sup>

...I will pray to God that He may powerfully illumine your heart through His faith and His love. (To Richard Wagner April 1853)<sup>26</sup>

Our God remains, everlastingly, Truth and Mercy! This is already revealed in the Old Testament – how much more in the New! (To Princess Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein, February 1878)<sup>27</sup>

Between 1859 and 1862 three events occurred in Liszt's life which profoundly affected him and much of his future life. In 1859 his son Daniel, a talented law

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<sup>24</sup> Walker, *Franz Liszt*, Vol. 1, p. 442.

<sup>25</sup> Liszt, *Selected Letters*, p. 18.

<sup>26</sup> Francis Hueffer, *Correspondence of Wagner and Liszt* (H. Grevel & Co. 1888) Vol. 1, p. 273.

<sup>27</sup> Liszt, *Selected Letters*, pp. 826-827.

student, took ill, gradually weakened, and died in December of that year. Liszt, along with most of the rest of his family, was devastated. His way of dealing with it included composing “Les Morts”, based on a poem by Lamennais.

His fiftieth birthday in October 1861 was the date of his planned marriage to Princess Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein, but this was cancelled at the last minute allegedly because of suspension or withdrawal of Papal permission. There is still debate as to why the wedding did not take place at a later date.

In 1862 Liszt was further deeply saddened by the death of his older daughter Blandine (from septicaemia caused by an abscess in her breast) a few months after the birth of her son.

These events caused Liszt to change noticeably. He became more introverted and appeared to start showing signs of age. His friend, Father Agostino Theiner, suggested he should spend some time at the monastery of the Madonna del Rosario near Rome to have a chance to find some peace.

Liszt spent five years based in the monastery, from 1863 to 1868. He occupied a small monastic cell in which he had an upright piano. He was able to read, compose, pray and meditate in absolute peace and solitude, and this complete change allowed him to come to terms with his grief and his dissatisfaction: ‘My life is simplifying itself, and the Catholic piety of my childhood has become a regular and also a regulating feeling.’<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Walker, *Franz Liszt*, Vol. 3, p. 55.

In 1865 he was admitted to minor orders within the church, thereafter being known as the Abbé Liszt.

### **Summary**

What emerges from a study of Liszt's life is a man with a true Catholic faith who was deeply affected by the injustices he experienced. Much inner turmoil, especially in his youth, arose from his difficulty in reconciling his high ideals with the social status the world accorded him as a musician. The writing of Lamennais and his continuing friendship with Liszt was a significant factor in Liszt's conviction that he had a worthwhile contribution to make to music, and in his belief that music had power to influence people's attitudes and actions.

Disgusted by Paganini's exploits which seemed to him to bring shame on music, Liszt's powerful work ethic caused him to strive for the majority of his life to ennoble his art and to use his gifts for the betterment of humanity. Over the years he raised huge sums of money for the poor and for other worthy charitable causes. He gave freely of his time and energy, and his own money, for the promotion of other performers and composers. Celebrity status was only of significance in that it made his charitable efforts much more successful.

Liszt's views on what the role of the musician should be are defined well by him in his book "*Life of Chopin*" (1852):

Let us learn from him [Chopin] to repulse all but the highest ambition, let us try to concentrate our labor upon efforts which will leave more lasting effects than the vain leading of the fashions of the passing hour. Let us renounce the corrupt spirit of the times in which we live, with all that is not worthy of art, all that will not endure, all that does not contain in itself some spark of that eternal and immaterial beauty, which it is the task of art to reveal and unveil as the condition of its own glory!<sup>29</sup>

This indicates quite clearly his idea that music was for the enrichment of humanity, that it fulfilled a spiritual function, and that this role of music should be an ongoing one and not simply a short-lived trend.

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<sup>29</sup> Franz Liszt, *Life of Chopin* (The Echo Library, 2006) p. 43.



## **Chapter 2**

### **Liszt's Support for Wagner**

It is entirely consistent with Liszt's views on the obligation of genius, democracy and the role of music that he should encourage artists to support each other 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his need' (a quotation used by Louis Blanc in 1840, a revision of an earlier saying of Henri de St Simon). This principle was further expanded by Lamennais:

The earth is as one great hive, and the inhabitants thereof are as the bees. Each bee is entitled to the portion of honey necessary to his subsistence; and if among men there should be one who wants this necessity, it is because justice and charity have disappeared from amongst them. Justice is life, charity is yet rather life; a gentler, a more bountiful life.<sup>1</sup>

During his stay in Weimar, Liszt encouraged performers, composers and some students to visit him for the purpose of music-making. A catalogue of those who took advantage of this would include some of the most prominent composers and performers of the time. In this environment, composers had opportunities to share new works with other composers and performers, and to make valuable contacts for the progression of their careers. William Mason's first-hand account of his experiences in Weimar gives a good flavour of the range of activities.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lamennais, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> William Mason, *Memories of a Musical Life* (Da Capo Press 1970), pp. 86-176.

In addition Liszt vigorously promoted the work of Beethoven. However, the most significant relationship he developed was with Richard Wagner, one which Liszt believed to be symbiotic but which history may well judge to have been parasitic. Their association lasted from its early beginnings in around 1840 to Wagner's death in 1883, and beyond through Wagner's second wife, who was Liszt's daughter Cosima, and the Bayreuth Festival. Descendants of Liszt and Wagner still manage this event.

### **Foundation of the Friendship**

When Liszt and Wagner first met in around 1840, Liszt was a major musical celebrity, while Wagner was fighting for recognition. In the crush of admirers surrounding him, Liszt paid scant attention to Wagner. Wagner followed this meeting by writing a letter of introduction to Liszt, but there seems to be no record of a reply. As a struggling composer Wagner was extremely envious of Liszt's success, and he wrote to his mother in 1841: 'I have felt bound to despise whomever I have seen succeed in this way!'<sup>3</sup>

Wagner's contempt may have been caused by Liszt's apparent lack of interest in him. A subsequent encounter in Berlin in December 1842, when the atmosphere was less crowded and more informal, seems to have disarmed Wagner and changed his opinion of Liszt completely:

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<sup>3</sup> Robert W. Gutman, *Richard Wagner: The Man, His Mind and His Music* (Secker & Warburg, 1968), p. 71.

The almost naïve simplicity and naturalness of his every word and phrase, and particularly its manner of expression, made as deep an impression on me as it had on everyone else, and for the first time I was able to account for the feeling of enchantment produced by Liszt in all who came within his sphere, and clearly saw how erroneous had been my former view as to its cause.<sup>4</sup>

In 1844 Liszt heard a performance of *Rienzi* in Dresden, became convinced of Wagner's genius, and resolved to arrange performances of Wagner's music as soon as possible in his capacity as Kapellmeister in Weimar. The relationship was thus ready to develop into one of the most significant in nineteenth century musical historiography.

In due course Liszt did stage *Tannhäuser* in 1849, his first full season in Weimar. Prior to this first production, Wagner had already asked Liszt for money:

....I have now received notice to repay all the money, and I cannot hold out another week.....The sum in question is 5,000 thalers;...Can you get me such a sum? Have you got it yourself, or has someone else who would pay it for the love of you? (June 23<sup>rd</sup> 1848)<sup>5</sup>

Imploring people to give him money was nothing new as Wagner had for some years had the reputation for hedonism at others' expense and unreliability in paying his debts. He had fled Leipzig in 1836 under threat of arrest for debt, and in 1839 while working in Riga, his passport was revoked and he escaped across the border under

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Wagner, *My Life* (Cambridge University Press 1983), p. 240.

<sup>5</sup> Hueffer, Vol. 1, p. 6.

cover of darkness in order to elude his creditors. He was jailed for debt in 1840 and had to beg money from friends in order to bail himself out. During these years, he felt himself to have been victimised, his talent unrecognised, but he remained firmly convinced in his own mind that he really was a genius. This arrogance in his personality antagonised those who employed him, so although he undertook some operatic conducting, for which he had some talent, his contracts were normally short-lived.

Liszt remained convinced of Wagner's potential to revolutionise music in general and opera in particular. In 1849, just three months after Liszt's performance of *Tannhäuser*, Wagner fled Dresden as a result of his involvement in the Dresden Insurrection, arriving as a refugee in Weimar. A warrant was issued for his arrest on a charge of high treason as a result. Liszt provided temporary sanctuary, and wrote to his former manager, Gaetano Belloni, of his resolve to help Wagner escape to Paris.

Richard Wagner (Kapellmeister at Dresden) has been here since yesterday.

That's a man of admirable genius; indeed, a very experienced genius which is evidently destined to beat out for itself a new and glorious path in art. The latest events in Dresden have impelled him to make a great resolution, in the accomplishment of which I have decided to do everything I can to help him.<sup>6</sup>

Although Wagner did reach Paris, he soon moved to Zurich, and did not return to Germany for eleven years.

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<sup>6</sup> Liszt, *Selected Letters*, p. 271.

Liszt had now openly declared his support for Wagner's music and was to continue to promote it during Wagner's exile, in addition to providing many other types of support and assistance, without which Wagner the composer probably could not have developed into the force he was later to become.

### **Financial Assistance**

Wagner was profligate with money. He was known to drink heavily and to be wildly self-indulgent: whenever he had some money it was always spent, and he believed he had a right to material comfort as the privilege of his genius. As a result he was regularly reliant on the charity of friends, and Liszt, believing completely in Wagner's musical genius, seems to have been only too happy to help whenever he could. The early letters from Wagner to Liszt make regular requests for money:

Wagner to Liszt: If you will do me a kindness, send me a little money... (June 1849) <sup>7</sup>

Liszt to Wagner: I have charged Belloni to remit to you 300 francs for travelling expenses. (June 1849) <sup>8</sup>

Wagner to Liszt: I implore by all that is dear to you to raise and collect as much as you possible can, and to send it, not to me, but to my wife.... (July 1849) <sup>9</sup>

Liszt to Wagner: In answer to your letter, I have remitted 100 thalers to your wife at Dresden. This sum has been handed to me by an admirer of Tannhäuser,

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<sup>7</sup> Hueffer, Vol. 1, pp. 32-33.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 35.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 40.

whom you do not know, and who has specially asked me not to name him to you. (July 1849) <sup>10</sup>

Direct requests for financial assistance continued, together with frequent hints of hardship, throughout Wagner's stay in Switzerland. Wagner obviously presumed Liszt was immensely wealthy even though Liszt's salary was modest and he had responsibilities towards his mother and children, and the finances of his partner (Princess Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein) were far from secure. Wagner also presumed that Liszt had sufficient influence with royalty and the nobility to secure him a steady income:

What I demand....is the settlement upon me of an honourable and large pension, solely for the purpose of creating my works of art undisturbed and without regard for external success.....I ask you therefore, definitely and finally, whether you will take the initiative in this matter? (January 1859) <sup>11</sup>

Liszt continued to provide as much financial support as he could, but he also helped to promote Wagner's work by arranging performances at a time when Wagner was unpopular. He also helped Wagner have his work published, thereby enabling him to earn some money of his own, and encouraged him to continue writing and composing in the belief that his genius would ultimately be recognised.

### **Political Assistance**

Liszt wholeheartedly disapproved of Wagner's involvement in political affairs, and made this disapproval known. He wrote to Grand Duke Carl Alexander (of Weimar)

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 41.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., Vol. 2, pp. 272, 274.

in May 1849 – when the warrant for Wagner’s arrest was issued – and reiterated his own belief as to the role of art. While not critical of Wagner’s music, Liszt appears to be dissociating himself from the controversy and thus protecting his own position:

Come what may, I did everything possible to dissuade him absolutely from any participation in political discord. Art has nowadays no need to join in the raucous cries from the barricades; its territory is purer and more exalted, and its influence at once more salutary and more lasting.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout his life Liszt was careful not to ally himself openly with any political faction, and never raised funds for, nor donated money to, any political cause. However, in the case of Wagner, he made some efforts at diplomacy:

If, as is not unlikely, I go to Berlin for a few days this winter, I shall try to interest the King in your genius and your future; perhaps I shall succeed in gaining his sympathy for you and in managing through that means your return by way of Berlin, which would certainly be your best chance. (October 1849)<sup>13</sup>

This particular effort was unsuccessful, but Liszt’s continued promotion of Wagner’s work in Germany gradually caused him to achieve a measure of recognition. Liszt used this change of attitude, coupled with his own high reputation, as a starting point for negotiations with several rulers of the German states in an effort to gain amnesty for Wagner and this object was achieved in 1861. The accession of King Ludwig II to the Bavarian throne in 1864 caused a reversal of Wagner’s fortunes. The new King

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<sup>12</sup> Liszt, *Selected Letters*, p. 273.

<sup>13</sup> Hueffer, Vol. 1, p. 52.

was a passionate devotee of his music and believed, as did Wagner, that such a genius should be given support to further his art without worrying about the mundane process of earning money.

### **Personal Difficulties**

By 1860 the friendship between Liszt and Wagner was cooling somewhat, partly because some were noticing that Wagner's developing harmonic style owed much to the influence of Liszt. A critique of *Tristan* by Richard Pohl in 1859 pointed this out publicly, and although Wagner was almost prepared to admit it privately between friends, he would have preferred the article to say that it was he who had influenced Liszt.<sup>14</sup>

Wagner also attempted to interfere in the matter of Liszt's forthcoming marriage to Princess Carolyne. He wrote to Hans von Bülow of his concerns about the effect on Liszt. Von Bülow forwarded the letter to Liszt who in turn informed Princess Carolyne:

Although he does not explain himself clearly, and even retains a certain delicacy of language which he has not used in other circumstances, it is apparent from this letter that he wishes to put asunder those whom God hath joined: that is, you and me.... In sum, he seems to wish to insinuate to Hans that you exert a regrettable influence over me, one which goes against my real character.... I

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<sup>14</sup> Walker, *Franz Liszt*, Vol. 2, p. 545.



almost urge you to [see Wagner]. But treat him very gently – for he is sick, and incurable.<sup>15</sup>

At this point Liszt and Wagner are starting to have less need for each other. Already enjoying some recognition and gaining notoriety as well, in 1861 Wagner achieved his dream of returning to Germany and experiencing fame and fortune. Liszt had by now resigned his post in Weimar and could no longer finance Wagner. He was also about to marry his long-term partner and embark on a new phase of his life where he would not require a cause to fight for. Wagner had also overstepped the boundaries by encroaching on Liszt's intimate personal feelings, taking the relationship beyond the realms of music. It is perhaps a testament to Liszt's love of Wagner's music and continuing belief in his genius that he did not abandon him completely.

### **Cosima**

Hans von Bülow, having been one of Liszt's star pupils (see Chapter 4), matured into one of his closest friends and associates. In 1857 he married Liszt's daughter Cosima though the basis of the marriage looks to modern eyes to have been ill-founded. As von Bülow wrote to Liszt in his proposal letter:

For me Cosima is greater than all women, not only because she bears your name but because she resembles you so closely, being in many of her characteristics a true mirror of your personality.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Liszt, *Selected Letters*, pp. 482-483.

<sup>16</sup> George R. Marek, *Cosima Wagner* (Harper & Row, 1981), p. 27.

Von Bülow's association with Liszt and their joint involvement with Wagner brought Cosima and Wagner together. By 1863 they had begun an affair and it appears that by August 1864 both Liszt and von Bülow were aware of this. Liszt attempted in vain to persuade Cosima to honour her marriage and Wagner turned against Liszt (now Abbé Liszt) as a result, writing in 1865:

This whole Catholic junk I can't stomach. Anybody who flees into it must have much to atone for. Your father repels me and if I can bear him at all, it is only because in my blind tolerance there lies more Christianity than in his whole pious fraud.<sup>17</sup>

It was important to Wagner that King Ludwig II of Bavaria, his patron, did not find out about the affair as this would have jeopardised Wagner's status and income. From 1863 until Wagner and Cosima both obtained divorces and finally married in 1870 it must have seemed to von Bülow that the whole world apart from King Ludwig knew of his predicament – his wife openly living with her lover and bearing his children. He was caricatured in the press and his personal life was a mockery.

Why did von Bülow tolerate the situation for so long when he must have known that there was no prospect of saving his marriage? Perhaps the answer lies partly in the hold Wagner had over King Ludwig, who was so infatuated with him and his music that he would have done anything to prevent losing Wagner as a friend. At the same time, von Bülow shared with King Ludwig and Liszt an undiminished faith in Wagner's musical abilities. In May 1866 King Ludwig even suggested that he should

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

abdicate and that Wagner should find a house near Berg where Ludwig could live with him, with the von Bülow family living nearby: 'While we are on this earth let us be together; the day of your death will be mine as well.'<sup>18</sup>

In June of the same year, in an effort to calm press outrage at Cosima's behaviour (and with Cosima's and von Bülow's approval), Wagner telegraphed Ludwig threatening to disappear unless Ludwig sent a letter to von Bülow, for publication, confirming Cosima as a true and faithful wife and mother. Ludwig obliged.<sup>19</sup>

Wagner was exploiting Ludwig's obsession and beginning to advise him on affairs of state, always under threat of withdrawing his friendship. Had von Bülow exposed Wagner and Cosima to Ludwig, he may have felt he could lose more than his wife, children (Cosima's first two daughters were his), and personal pride – perhaps he believed his artistic life could also have been threatened. Under normal circumstances one would have expected him to seek assistance from Liszt, a central figure in the lives of all three, but Liszt had in 1863 begun his monastic retreat so von Bülow was left to deal with it alone as best he could. Whatever indignities he suffered, his belief in Wagner's musical genius seems to have been unshaken and he put aside his personal difficulties in his continuing support of the music.

Liszt's opinion of Cosima's conduct was expressed unequivocally in a letter to her when, in 1868, he heard of her impending divorce from von Bülow and marriage to Wagner. To achieve this necessitated Cosima's abandonment of her Catholic faith in favour of Protestantism, and this was clearly a step that Liszt could not reconcile

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

himself to, and one which he and Princess Carolyne had refused to take despite the consequences of their irregular relationship. The full text of Liszt's letter is quoted by Alan Walker in Volume 3 (pp.135-136) of his biography of Liszt, but the following extract demonstrates Liszt's feelings:

Where are you going? What are you telling me? ... God save me from judging you wrongly. I know that nothing infamous, nothing low, nothing futile is subjugating you but you have become giddy and are dissipating the vital and holy forces of your soul by sealing an evil deed with approval. This perversion, this adulteration of God's gifts breaks my heart!<sup>20</sup>

### **Religious Differences**

Wagner's anti-Semitism has been a subject of such discussion over the years and is so well-documented that any more than an acknowledgement of it is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, Wagner was not alone in his beliefs. As a result of various pogroms in Russia, and the Franco-Prussian War, large numbers of Jews were migrating to Germany, and amidst the efforts to unite the German states into a single country, many people felt their nationality to be under threat. Wagner was more emphatic than most in his belief, and his conviction of his own supreme genius, not just as a composer, compelled him to voice this in print. Both Cosima and Hans von Bülow held strong anti-Semitic views, and some believe that Cosima's were more violent than Wagner's and that she was responsible for some of the later articles appearing under his name. After Wagner's death it was Cosima who wrote regarding the Bayreuth Festival:

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<sup>20</sup> Walker, *Franz Liszt*, Vol. 3, p. 135.

Forty millions, that's what I need to give the Germans the Festivals. Perhaps one of these days a good soul will give them to me, a Jew who wants to atone for the evil of his race.<sup>21</sup>

With his closest associates (including his long-term partner, Princess Carolyne) declaring their anti-Semitism publicly, the question quickly arises as to whether or not Liszt shared these opinions. The answer is very simple – there is no surviving evidence to suggest that he did, and much to support the contrary. Many of his closest associates, pupils and friends throughout his life were Jewish (Carl Tausig, Moriz Rosenthal, Joseph Joachim, were three of the many) and Alan Walker's biography states that there has never been any evidence that would suggest Liszt was in any way bigoted, racist, or segregationist. Walker sums it up succinctly: 'For Liszt, music was a branch of the great tree of humanity, a universal language that cut across all racial barriers.'<sup>22</sup>

### **Summary**

Liszt truly believed in Wagner's ability to shape German music according to the beliefs he had formulated from his association with Lamennais and his own deep religious convictions. Unlike Paganini who used his musical gifts and abilities as a means to acquire the money to fund his own vices, Liszt saw Wagner requiring money to provide the environment he needed to produce the "Music of the Future". In Liszt's opinion, Wagner was the genius whose work would transcend what had gone

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<sup>21</sup> Marek, p. 211.

<sup>22</sup> Walker, *Franz Liszt*, Vol. 2, p. 357.

before, and therefore his own role was to help provide the support necessary for the accomplishment of this.

...this work [Lohengrin] will confer on a public making itself worthy of understanding and enjoying it more honour than that public could confer upon the work by any amount of applause. (Liszt to Wagner, September 1859)<sup>23</sup>

Wagner's exploitation of Ludwig's love for him, the vast amounts of money he demanded in the name of art to provide for his own comfort and his attempts to control political events are totally inconsistent with Liszt's belief in the artist as the servant rather than the beneficiary of art.

On two occasions in his past, Liszt had found his place in the world difficult to accept and had seriously wished to retire to the priesthood. In 1863, he had no job, his relationship with Princess Carolyne had broken up, two of his children had recently died young, and the affair between Cosima and Wagner was causing major public scandal. It is easy to believe that again Liszt thought he was no longer in control of his life and resolved to find comfort in religion – perhaps Wagner was right in thinking he felt he had much to atone for. This time the circumstances were right, and he entered the monastery prior to taking holy orders.

After the marriage of Wagner and Cosima Liszt distanced himself from them but years later Liszt and Wagner became friends again. The support Liszt offered to Wagner in later life was less direct and he used only his own reputation and the

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<sup>23</sup> Heuffer, pp. 106-107.

consequent fascination for the public – his presence in Bayreuth helped to attract more patrons. His appreciation of Wagner's music never waned. Carl Lachmund, a pupil of Liszt in the 1880s who was a child in America when the aforementioned events were unfolding, summed the relationship up thus:

Much in their genius was in unison; the reverse was the case of their characters. Wagner was egotistic and autocratic; but he had need of Liszt, and but for Liszt's magnanimity, and spirit of tolerance, their friendship might not have endured.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Carl Lachmund, *Living with Liszt* (Pendragon Press, 1998), p. 23.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Liszt's Achievements in Hungary**

‘Let’s face it, Liszt wasn’t Hungarian, he was a German. He couldn’t even speak the language!’ These words were spoken by a pianist in a verbal introduction to his performance of Liszt’s B minor Sonata in a bicentenary celebration recital in Edinburgh on 18<sup>th</sup> June 2011.<sup>1</sup> The statement was accompanied by laughter both from the pianist and the audience and the sentiment seems to echo the popular perception of Liszt’s nationality that still prevails today, even though some may consider him French rather than German.

The issue of how nationality can be defined is beyond the scope of this study. What is much more relevant is Liszt’s own feeling of nationality as it was this that shaped his continuing relationship with Hungary. The question we should ask is not ‘Was Liszt Hungarian?’ but rather ‘Did Liszt consider himself to be Hungarian?’ How closely did he identify himself with the Hungarian people?

This section investigates his relationship with Hungary, what he did to further musical appreciation and education there and how his actions relate to his overall vision of democracy in music.

#### **“I am Hungarian”**

The following two quotes from Liszt, dating from 1840 and 1873 respectively, demonstrate quite clearly his continuing attitude to his homeland and the first also contains his response to those who mocked him in the French press.

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<sup>1</sup> John Willmetts at Edinburgh Society of Musicians 18<sup>th</sup> June 2011



As a child I received from my country precious tokens of interest, and the means of going abroad to develop my artistic vocation. When grown up, and after long years, the young man returns to bring her the fruits of his work and the future of his will, the enthusiasm of the hearts which open to receive him and the expression of a national joy must not be confounded with the frantic demonstrations of an audience of amateurs.<sup>2</sup>

Please allow me that, apart from my regrettable ignorance of the Hungarian language, I remain Magyar in my heart and soul from birth to grave; as a consequence, I earnestly wish to further the progress of Hungarian music. (Letter to Antal Augusz, May 1873.)<sup>3</sup>

Liszt certainly was born in Hungary but the language spoken during his early childhood by him and his family was German. However, he was still a young child when his family left Hungary and he did not return there for nearly twenty years.

The earliest indication of publicly displayed Hungarian national sentiments comes from a concert announcement in Pest in 1823:

I am Hungarian, and I do not know a greater happiness than to introduce to my beloved country the first fruits of my education and studies. ...perhaps then I will have the good fortune to become a small branch of my country's glory.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Walker, *Franz Liszt*, Vol. 1, p. 328.

<sup>3</sup> Mária Eckhardt, 'Liszt's 125-Year-Old Academy of Music', *Advanced Musical Education in Europe: International Conference* (2001), 109-132 (p. 114).

<sup>4</sup> Walker, *Franz Liszt*, Vol. 1, p. 87.

At this time Liszt was too young to have written this himself – it was written by his father. For the next few years, as he was growing up and developing his musical career, he seems to have given little thought to his nationality and had no direct contact with Hungary. Later in his life he was to fulfil the aim set out here on his behalf.

### **Floods in Pest**

In March 1838 after a very severe winter, snowmelt caused the Danube to burst its banks resulting in catastrophic floods in Pest. There were many fatalities; crops, villages and the city of Pest itself were largely destroyed. Thousands of homeless people were at risk from starvation and disease.

Liszt was in Venice when he heard the news:

I was badly shaken by that disaster... And the surge of emotions revealed to me the meaning of the word 'homeland'. I was suddenly transported back to the past, and in my heart I found the treasury of memories from my childhood intact. A magnificent landscape appeared before my eyes: it was the Danube flowing over the reefs! It was the broad plain where tame herds freely grazed! It was Hungary, the powerful, fertile land that has brought forth so many noble sons! It was my homeland. And I exclaimed in patriotic zeal that I, too, belonged to this old and powerful race. I, too, am a son of this original, untamed nation which will surely see the dawn of better days....<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., Vol. 1, pp. 254-255.

He immediately set off for Vienna to arrange a series of concerts to raise funds for disaster relief. His actions also inspired others to contribute to the appeal.

Clearly, Liszt felt he belonged to the land of his birth even though he had not visited for over fifteen years, and did not even speak Hungarian. The childhood memories he mentions are those of his very early years, and these have almost certainly become romanticised so they take the form of a carefree time of innocence, devoid of responsibility and worry.

### **Revolutionary Tendencies and The Sword**

In the 1830s, Hungary was still ruled by Austria, as it had been for over a century. Following on from the American War of Independence and the French Revolution, Hungary was seeking its own national identity and tensions were running high between Hungary and Austria. At the time, Liszt was the most famous living person to whom Hungary could lay claim, and as he was publicly expressing his concern for Hungary, he became a sort of national hero and ambassador for his country.

In 1839-40 he finally accepted an invitation to visit Hungary. People travelled many miles to hear him play and everywhere he went he was received with rapturous cheers. After a concert in January 1840 he was presented with a jewelled sabre, as he wrote to Marie d'Agoult:

Addressing me briefly in Hungarian before the entire audience, which applauded frenziedly, he (Count Leó Festetics) then girt the sabre on me in the name of the Nation.... this scene, which anywhere else would have been ridiculous...It was magnificent. It was unique.<sup>6</sup>

Given the current political situation, Liszt's acceptance speech on receipt of the sabre was potentially inflammatory as he urged that if peaceful and legitimate solutions could not be found to the issues of national identity and freedom: '...let our swords be drawn again from the scabbard...and let our blood be shed to the last drop for freedom, king, and country.'<sup>7</sup>

One piece that figured in almost every one of his concerts in Hungary was Liszt's own arrangement of the Rakócsy March, a melody he had known since childhood,<sup>8</sup> and which he described as 'a kind of aristocratic Hungarian *Marseillaise*'.<sup>9</sup> Having been away from the country for so long, he may well have been unaware that the Austrians had banned this tune because of its use by the revolutionaries. His use of the tune, combined with his words on bloodshed, almost certainly contributed to his adoption by the people of Hungary as a national mascot. For a man who deliberately avoided allying himself publicly with any political faction, and never used music to raise money for any political cause, these events are extraordinary. Being seen as a supporter of the revolutionary cause almost certainly influenced the immense enthusiasm shown towards him in Hungary at this time.

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<sup>6</sup> Liszt, *Selected Letters*, p. 127.

<sup>7</sup> Walker, *Franz Liszt*, Vol. 1, p. 326.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 88 n.

<sup>9</sup> Liszt, *Selected Letters*, p. 127.

Whether or not Liszt actually deliberately joined himself to the revolutionary cause is uncertain. What does emerge is that he was staggered by his reception and deeply honoured by it. He admits to feeling unworthy of the honour and: ‘I accepted these more than flattering tokens as imposing new duties on me to fulfil.’<sup>10</sup>

He accepted the award in the spirit in which it was bestowed and he wore this and other awards with great pride. The press, especially in Paris, openly made fun of him but he was prepared to defend publicly his appreciation of the honour and his right to wear it.

Liszt alone among all warriors is without reproach,  
For despite his big sword, we know that this hero  
Has vanquished only semiquavers,  
And slain only pianos. (from *Miroir Drolatique*, 8<sup>th</sup> July 1842)<sup>11</sup>

In Hungary, sir, in that country of antique and chivalrous manners, the sabre has a patriotic significance. It is a special token of manhood; it is the weapon of every man who has a right to carry a weapon.<sup>12</sup>

The “new duties” he carried out virtually immediately were: firstly to play a concert to raise funds for the proposed new Conservatory in Pest<sup>13</sup>; and secondly to visit his

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

<sup>11</sup> Walker, *Franz Liszt*, Vol. 1, p. 327.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 328.

<sup>13</sup> Liszt, *Selected Letters*, p. 129.

birthplace in Raiding where he gave money for the poor and more money for the repair of the village church organ.<sup>14</sup>

### **National Music and Hungarian Rhapsodies**

Exoticism in music was well established by Liszt's time. This consisted mainly of stylised devices used to suggest something foreign and exciting and contained little, if any, true ethnic culture. In 1836, Glinka's 'A Life for the Tsar' was among the first works to attempt to portray a real sense of national identity, and the national trend in music was developed through the nineteenth century by the 'Five' in Russia, Grieg, Smetana, Dvořák and Sibelius. In Britain, Scottishness was very much in vogue thanks to the works of Sir Walter Scott, the music of Nathaniel Gow and their patronage by King George IV.

In the nineteenth century when many countries were seeking to establish national identity and people were fighting for democracy, music was a way of establishing national spirit and demonstrating the shared culture of a nation in a way that people could understand. Chopin appears to have been amongst the first to demonstrate real national style with his Polonaises (from 1817) and Mazurkas (from 1826) based on Polish dances.

As a child in Hungary, Liszt had frequently heard Gypsy music and had loved it. Part of the attraction was the freedom of expression they achieved through improvisation. In 1840, on his return to Hungary, he reacquainted himself with this culture and as a

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<sup>14</sup> Walker, *Franz Liszt*, Vol. 1, p. 334.

result produced a group of Hungarian national Melodies, later remodelled into the Hungarian Rhapsodies.

Liszt's association of Gypsy music with Hungary through childhood memories appears to have caused some confusion. In his Rhapsodies, and his later book *Des Bohémiens et leur musique en Hongrie* (1859), he represents the Gypsy music as the true ethnic music of Hungary. Gypsy music was not native to Hungary alone but originated with the Zigeuner, who had been expelled from almost everywhere except Hungary. European audiences were thus misled until the early twentieth century research by Bartók and Kodály revealed the true folk music of the region. Liszt's compositions were then discredited as not being authentically national, but based on a tradition that was European rather than Hungarian. However, his efforts were made in good faith based on what he knew, and it is surely unfair to denigrate these works on the basis of later research.

For the purposes of this essay the ethnic authenticity of these pieces is of less importance than the intention behind them. As has already been pointed out, Hungary was seeking national identity, and Liszt believed this music to be Hungarian. He was therefore attempting to provide Hungary with its own musical identity in the way he thought best. He considered the proposed preface to the collection as important as the pieces themselves, although this planned explanation was not included with them but evolved into the later book on Gypsy music in 1859. The importance he attached to this can be seen in his request to Marie d'Agoult to assist in its preparation:

I might well have another commission for you, ... It concerns a Preface or Postface to my *Rhapsodies Hongroises*, for which I would of course give you a good many notes and instructions. I greatly value this work and it is absolutely necessary for the deep and inner significance of this series of compositions to be made eloquently clear to the public.<sup>15</sup>

### **Conservatory**

At the time of Liszt's 1839-40 Hungarian visit, plans for a Conservatory in Pest had been under way for a few years and the intention was to open it as soon as possible confining its curriculum initially to singing. Liszt donated the majority of the proceeds from his concerts in Pest in January 1840, and the sum he gave was more than twice the amount raised by Hungary in two years. The singing academy opened in March 1840 with two teachers and 73 students.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to his financial contribution, Liszt also provided a deed of gift in which he emphasised his view that the singing school was only the first phase in the development of a complete conservatory. In 1846, he donated yet more money, again assigning it to the singing school.

It took a further ten years before the school was able to expand into instrumental teaching and relaunch itself as a Conservatory, but it was not until the Austro-Hungarian compromise of 1867 that it was allowed to use the title "National" Conservatory. Even at this stage, it was not state-funded, the level of teaching was

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<sup>15</sup> Liszt, *Selected Letters*, pp. 255-256.

<sup>16</sup> Eckhardt, p. 111.



lower than in the other European Conservatories and only a limited range of subjects could be offered.

By 1870, however, Hungarian musicians and music lovers petitioned the Minister of the Interior for a state-funded national academy modelled on similar institutions abroad in order to bring musical education up to the same standard as that in other European countries. In an effort to attract Liszt into permanent residence in Hungary, he was approached with a view to offering him an opportunity to influence the policies of the music academy at the highest level. The two primary stipulations made by Liszt were that quality should be sought before quantity, and that the indigenous national music had to be studied and cultivated (by this it has to be assumed he meant the Gypsy music).

Liszt also felt that study of the piano had to be compulsory for all instrumentalists and singers alike as it would provide a tool for personal development into higher level studies. This was to bring the curriculum closer to that of Vienna, as Liszt explained to Princess Carolyne in 1877:

The piano is the microcosm of music. Singers of both sexes, flautists and bassoonists, even cornettists and kettledrummers, have to learn the piano if they want to find their bearings intelligently in their own field. And so at the Vienna Conservatorium they have introduced a rule that a piano course of 2 or 3 years is obligatory for all pupils... This rule will be followed profitably by all

conservatoires, if they do indeed wish to be of use to the honourable practice of the art.<sup>17</sup>

In addition he recommended the establishment of a distinct department devoted to Church music, although this was not achieved till 1926.<sup>18</sup> Church music was a subject very dear to Liszt, and its reform was one project he pursued for most of his life, albeit with limited success. As early as 1834 Liszt's first published article 'On Future Church Music' advocated reform of Church music, and musical unity between the theatre and the Church.<sup>19</sup>

Liszt was repeatedly consulted as the Academy was formed and during the first academic year he began what was to be a life-long association as teacher there:

I willingly undertake, from the 1<sup>st</sup> March [1876], to conduct a pianoforte class (for virtuosi and teachers).....I can only lay claim to be the well-intentioned servant of Art and of Hungary. (Letter to Kornel von Abrányi January 1876)<sup>20</sup>

From 1876 until his death in 1886 Liszt spent at least three months of each year in Budapest teaching at the Academy. The school itself gradually developed over the years, adding departments one by one, until eventually it developed into a full-scale conservatory to rival those elsewhere in Europe. In 1925, in recognition of Liszt's contributions in its early years, it was renamed the Franz Liszt Academy of Music and

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<sup>17</sup> Liszt, *Selected Letters*, p. 824.

<sup>18</sup> Eckhardt, p. 117.

<sup>19</sup> Walker, *Franz Liszt*, Vol. 1, p. 159.

<sup>20</sup> La Mara, *Letters of Franz Liszt* (H. Grevel & Co, 1894), Vol. 2, p. 291.

can name amongst its alumni Béla Bartók, György Ligeti and Georg Solti, each of whom has made a significant contribution to world music.

### **Summary**

One of the most basic assumptions on the part of Socialism, Christianity and most other major faiths is that all men are born equal, and all should therefore have equal opportunities to develop their talents. At the start of the nineteenth century Hungary and the Hungarians were considered inferior to Austria and the Austrians under the combined Austro-Hungarian administration, but Hungary was seeking independence and Liszt became an ideal figurehead on account of his international celebrity status.

Liszt's support for Hungary through music took many forms – fundraising for the poor and for flood victims, and publicising Hungary through his own compositions. He encouraged the appreciation of music and the fostering of Hungarian musical talent by assisting with the foundation of the Conservatory and by making a substantial time investment teaching there during the last years of his life. In recognition of the family's Hungarian roots, Liszt's son Daniel studied the Hungarian language in fulfilment of a promise to his father, though he admitted he found it very difficult.<sup>21</sup>

Liszt has had much criticism, both during his lifetime and after his death, by those who maintained he was not a true Hungarian, but some hybrid cosmopolitan citizen of Europe. His Hungarian Rhapsodies have also fallen victim to the error Liszt made in identifying European Gypsy music as specifically Hungarian. However, his actions

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<sup>21</sup> Walker, *Franz Liszt*, Vol. 2, p. 475.

and his letters show that he acted in accordance with his beliefs – religious, cultural and musical – and helped to give Hungary its own musical voice in Europe.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Liszt's Teaching**

Music, unlike painting, sculpture and literature, requires an intermediary (a performer or ensemble) to make a work of art (a composition) accessible to the general public.

Through his many concerts and also via his conducting career, Liszt helped to establish the idea of interpretative performance art and devoted much of his time, especially in his latter years, to ensuring that the next generation understood its essence.

It is perhaps during his tenure as Kapellmeister in Weimar that Liszt had greatest freedom to explore his own musical vision and communicate it on a one-to-one basis with other musicians through teaching and informal music-making. This section looks at Liszt's attitude to teaching, his relationship with his own teachers and his work with his students.

### **Liszt's Early Teachers**

After the family left Hungary and settled in Vienna, Liszt's father sought the teachers of highest reputation for his son. At that time Czerny was considered to be one of the finest pianists of the time. His timetable was full and he felt he could not accept another student, but when he heard Liszt play he changed his mind. Young Liszt was taught by Czerny for about eighteen months.<sup>1</sup> During this time Czerny saw Liszt virtually every day and treated him almost like a family member. He also decided not

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<sup>1</sup> Ramann, Vol. 1, pp. 53-54.

to charge Liszt for tuition, even though teaching was his primary source of income and his fees were normally high. Liszt acknowledged this debt during his adult life by promoting Czerny's compositions and his teaching methods. Liszt also dedicated his *Transcendental Studies* to Czerny.<sup>2</sup> A measure of his continuing gratitude to Czerny can be seen in letters to him, the following (dated 1828) being a good example:

My very dear Master, When I think of all the immense obligations under which I am placed towards you and at the same time consider how long I have left you without a sign of remembrance, I am perfectly ashamed and miserable, and I despair of ever being forgiven by you!<sup>3</sup>

A similar situation arose when Adam Liszt approached the elderly Salieri, who undertook Liszt's training in theory and composition. Salieri also gave the lessons free of charge and saw him every day. In addition, he wrote to Prince Esterhazy, Adam Liszt's employer, asking him to facilitate a move to the centre of Vienna in order to be able to see him every day, and to avoid the exhaustion Liszt experienced through the travel to and from his lodgings on the outskirts of the city.<sup>4</sup> Liszt's appreciation of Salieri's kindness also lasted a lifetime.

### **Liszt in Weimar**

Teaching was a regular activity for Liszt after he retired from the professional concert circuit. As a very young man he had done some teaching in Paris following the death

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<sup>2</sup> Walker, *Franz Liszt*, Vol. 1, p. 71.

<sup>3</sup> La Mara, Vol. 1, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Walker, *Franz Liszt*, Vol. 1, pp. 73-75.

of his father, but apart from the Caroline Saint-Cricq incident (see Chapter 1), little detail is known. However, it appears that he modelled his early teaching on the methods of Czerny, and he also advocated the use of the Kalkbrenner Hand-guide to help strengthen the hands and eliminate tension.<sup>5</sup>

Liszt was first appointed Kapellmeister in Extraordinary in Weimar in 1842, on a part-time basis working alongside the permanent director of the theatre, Hyppolyte Chélaré, for three months each year. In 1848, following his retirement from professional performing, he took up residence in Weimar, and his significant teaching started after this. His overall ambitions for Weimar are summed up in the following quote:

Weimar under the Grand Duke Carl August was a new Athens. Let us think today of constructing a new Weimar.... Let us allow talent to function freely in its sphere.<sup>6</sup>

To fulfil this aim he invited and encouraged eminent musicians to visit, to perform and to bring new compositions to be played. His reputation as a pianist did indeed attract a large number of his friends, potential students and many other composers and performers. Although there was no actual concert hall, only the theatre, musical events took place in Liszt's home, the Altenburg. Many of these seem to have been fairly informal occasions, the music played being dependent on who was there.

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<sup>5</sup> Reginald R. Gerig, *Famous Pianists & Their Technique* (Indiana University Press, 2007) p. 180.

<sup>6</sup> Walker, *Franz Liszt*, Vol. 2, p. 91.

### **Liszt and his Pupils**

Among the many visitors to Weimar were a large number of aspiring pianists wishing to study with Liszt, attracted by his fame as a pianist. Those he accepted became immersed in music of all types, had regular opportunities to hear Liszt play solo and chamber music, and also had chances to play with, and for, some of the famous names of the time.

We were thus enjoying the best music, played by the best artists. In addition to this there were the symphony concerts and the opera, with occasional attendance at rehearsal. Liszt took it for granted that his pupils would appreciate these remarkable advantages and opportunities, and I think we did.<sup>7</sup>

Occasionally students were given accommodation in the Altenburg itself and were treated as part of Liszt's immediate family. Most of them remained among his close friends for life. Thus an environment was created where musical talent was encouraged and could flourish.

His idea was that the pupils whom he accepted should all be far enough advanced to practise and prepare themselves without routine instruction, and he expected them to be ready whenever he gave them an opportunity to play.<sup>8</sup>

Not only did he require his pupils to be of advanced standard, he also needed to be sure they had strong motivation. The vast majority of his pupils were therefore aspiring or established professionals, and during his period as Kapellmeister they

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<sup>7</sup> Mason, pp. 92-93.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 90.



remained few in number. His own reputation was such that he 'had the pick of all the young musicians in Europe for his pupils.'<sup>9</sup>

### **Liszt's Teaching**

During his Weimar employment, Liszt's teaching was quite informal and he did not assign fixed lesson times. Thus the careful selection of able, motivated, pupils and flexibility of tuition periods gave him the time to pursue his own more personal goals as well. If he wished to be away from Weimar for a few days, nobody would feel they were being let down by him. When he was ready he would invite 'the boys' to his house for a session when he would ask them to play.<sup>10</sup> In his later years in Weimar, he did set aside specific class times three afternoons a week.

Only rarely did Liszt give individual instruction. When a pupil was playing, others were encouraged to sit and listen. Liszt believed that although at first pupils would be nervous, this approach would foster competition and encourage everyone to do his best.<sup>11</sup> This was the start of the masterclass format which Liszt continued to use for the rest of his life and which is still very widely used today.

Throughout his teaching years Liszt did not teach technique; he believed this was a task for conservatory teachers.

Liszt's teaching cannot be codified, he strove for the spirit of the work; and music, like religion, has no language; he taught as Christ taught religion, in an

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>11</sup> Alan Walker, *Reflections on Liszt* (Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 54.

allegorical way, or by metaphor. But magical was the effect of his influence.

Those sufficiently advanced to understand, acquired from the great master what they could not have found anywhere else in the world, then or now, at whatever price. Of plain technic he said little or nothing. Why should he have done so?

Anyone requiring instruction in technic did not belong here.<sup>12</sup>

I have always held that great technic does not so much come from the fingers; it is the *intellectual spirit* that gives the power for the technic.<sup>13</sup>

Determination being a dominant trait in Liszt's character, he insisted that one should, first and above all, "have courage". To say "can't" angered him.<sup>14</sup>

During a class Liszt would regularly move a pupil from the seat at the piano and take his place, demonstrating how he felt a passage should be performed. In this way all his pupils regularly heard him play and discuss a wide variety of different piano music, thus having an opportunity to observe his general approach to piano playing in addition to specific details of particular passages. Several of his pupils kept diaries recording different aspects of their experiences with Liszt: August G  llerich noted many of Liszt's remarks on individual pieces<sup>15</sup>; William Mason gives a first-hand account of Liszt's musical life during part of his period as Kapellmeister<sup>16</sup>; Carl Lachmund writes about Liszt's later years in Weimar<sup>17</sup>. These accounts all agree as to

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<sup>12</sup> Lachmund, p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>15</sup> August G  llerich, *The Piano Master Classes of Franz Liszt 1884-1886* (Indiana University Press 1996).

<sup>16</sup> Mason.

<sup>17</sup> Lachmund.

his methods of teaching and the way in which he treated his pupils as colleagues, friends, and equals in music.

Liszt's focus on interpretation rather than technique, taken alongside his more relaxed open environment enabling group discussion, is very much in harmony with his musical vision. Around the middle of the nineteenth century, performance was beginning to be judged on interpretation rather than sheer virtuosic technique.<sup>18</sup> The classical canon was also being formed, which preserved and valued the work of earlier composers instead of concentrating primarily on new music. Although Liszt's work in Weimar, both as a conductor and as a teacher, made a major contribution to this change in attitude, many other musicians (Schumann for example) must also be given their fair share of the credit.<sup>19</sup>

### **Two of the Most Notable Students**

Hans von Bülow (1830-1894) was twelve when he first encountered Liszt. His real interest in music started at the age of nine and later he studied at the Leipzig Conservatory, then briefly with Friedrich Wieck in Dresden. His parents opposed a musical career and he became a law student. With Liszt's reassurances to his mother he first tried conducting then became a piano student with Liszt in 1851. He lived with Liszt in Weimar and received a two-hour lesson once a week. Liszt did not charge him for his keep or for his lessons. Instead, von Bülow acted as Liszt's scribe, making fair copies of scores and parts and writing and editing articles. Liszt regarded him as his natural successor as a pianist.

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<sup>18</sup> Dahlhaus, p. 137.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

Despite his disastrous marriage to Cosima Liszt and her subsequent marriage to Wagner, von Bülow remained a close friend and associate of Liszt. He also believed in Wagner's musical ability and continued to promote and conduct Wagner's music. This ability to separate the musical from the personal issues, especially in the case of Wagner, was a characteristic he shared with Liszt (see Chapter 2).

It is as a conductor that von Bülow found his niche and was instrumental in furthering conducting techniques. He was also influential in the career of Richard Strauss, helping him obtain his first conducting job.

Carl Tausig (1841-1871) first played for Liszt when he was thirteen. Both Liszt and Hans von Bülow were astonished by the standard he achieved. Probably as a result of his own early experiences, Liszt did not wish to encourage the cult of the child prodigy, but due to Tausig's exceptional talent he did agree to accept him. There is a definite parallel here with Liszt's own early acceptance by Czerny and Salieri. Tausig lived in the Altenburg and was treated almost as son by Liszt, who wrote to Marie Lipsius just a few days after Tausig's death in 1871:

I do remember how greatly astonished I was at his extraordinary talent when I first heard him play. ... I felt some compunction in undertaking to give him further instruction, determined not to undertake the task..... However Tausig insisted on remaining with me. ... I was accused of being over-indulgent with him, and of thus spoiling him; but I really could not have acted otherwise, and I loved him with all my heart.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> La Mara, Vol. 2, p. 207.

Tausig died suddenly of typhus in July 1871 when his career as pianist, composer and teacher was at its height and he was being compared with Liszt. Liszt obviously thought very highly of Tausig, and William Mason says: 'I think Liszt regarded Tausig as the best of all his pupils.'<sup>21</sup>

### **Weimar Masterclasses**

For the last few years of his life Liszt spent several months in Weimar each year where he taught three afternoons a week. He continued to use the same masterclass format he had developed during his period as Kapellmeister. When pupils arrived they would place the scores of the pieces they were prepared to play on the piano and when Liszt came in he would select from this pile.

As before, the majority of these pupils were aiming to follow or enhance a performing career, and visiting artists, scientists, nobility and friends were often made welcome too. So great was the reputation of Liszt's classes that when he was in residence the town of Weimar was filled with pianists all practising as hard as they could.

Eventually the residents complained and a bye-law was passed restricting practice to certain hours, and only with the windows closed, with a fine imposed on offenders.

Alan Walker believes the idea that he had become a bit of a humbug but was still able to generate revenue for the council would have caused Liszt some moments of quiet amusement.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Mason, p. 176.

<sup>22</sup> Walker, *Franz Liszt*, Vol. 3, pp. 253-254.

Liszt continued to treat his pupils as friends and equals, regularly meeting groups of them socially for as long as he was able to do so.

### **Remuneration**

Liszt's phenomenal reputation and fame would have allowed him to charge high fees for lessons, and on arrival some pupils were anxious about whether or not they could afford to pay him: 'I could not afford it – let alone the cost of the lessons with so great a man.'<sup>23</sup>

Instead he never charged anything: 'I learned soon after my arrival in Weimar that he never took pay from his pupils.'<sup>24</sup> Not only did he not charge, any mention of paying him was likely to anger him: 'remember, he accepts no remuneration, and any references to it irritate him.'<sup>25</sup>

### **Summary**

It is widely accepted that Liszt was the main force behind the masterclass format that is still extensively in use today. His teaching methods reflected and publicised his own belief in the performer as artist whose duty was to communicate the inner voice of the music. Liszt taught that musicianship and artistry must transcend technique, a philosophy followed by music teachers to this day.

Nowadays there are many recorded examples of masterclasses available for viewing online, and with the benefit of modern technology these can be listened to several times. Perhaps one that gives a flavour of how Liszt worked with his students can be

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<sup>23</sup> Lachmund, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> Mason, p. 90.

<sup>25</sup> Lachmund, p. 7.

seen when maestro Daniel Barenboim works with student Lang Lang on Beethoven's Sonata Op57 (Appassionata) 1<sup>st</sup> movement. With a few words and some brief demonstration Barenboim opens new perspectives on the performance of this piece. The changes are subtle but magical and the ideas can be applied not only to this work but to many others within the standard repertoire.<sup>26</sup>

The environment Liszt provided for his pupils over the years was absolutely consistent with his own personal beliefs and philosophy of life. His pupils were immersed in a world of music and pianism. He created unique opportunities for performers and composers to demonstrate their talent in the company of established musicians who could help further their careers.

The fact that Liszt would accept no money enabled him to accept pupils equally, on the basis of ability to play rather than ability to pay. This is a repetition of the generous treatment he received as a child from Czerny and Salieri in their recognition of his early talent.

Liszt created a worldwide network of colleagues and friends through his masterclasses, and his pupils generally were keenly aware of the amazing opportunity they were given when Liszt accepted them:

I rushed for the open, with the numb fear of the tears behind my eyes....He had accepted me....Three times a week I would be privileged to attend his lessons, to play whenever I had a piece ready, to hear the playing of the other pupils, of

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<sup>26</sup> <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qFKjTJ566c4>> [accessed 13 December 2011].

whom some had already won public recognition; to listen to the comments, criticisms, illustrations of a Master before whom all other masters seemed – as I deemed it – but pygmies. And all this was to be free.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Lachmund, p. 10.



## **Chapter 5**

### **Exploitation, Betrayal, Misunderstanding, Disillusionment**

The foregoing chapters have suggested that, on the whole, Liszt was a man of high principles, generous with his time and money in his efforts to further his personal vision of music. A nature such as this unfortunately lends itself to many different kinds of exploitation, betrayal, misunderstanding and mockery. Journalism has always reported (not always strictly accurately) on the activities of celebrities, and this was as true in Liszt's time as it is today. Liszt was regularly shown in the press as arrogant, ridiculous, self-important and pretentious. Much of this he seems to have shrugged off without paying too much attention to it, though some of it has survived to colour attitudes to this day.

Unfortunately some of the negative press he received can be attributed to some of his closest family, friends and associates - people he trusted and from whom he probably expected better. At times this must have been a severe test of his equanimity. This section discusses some of the most significant examples of how Liszt was affected and how he reacted.

#### **Adam Liszt**

Liszt's father, Adam, has been accused of exploiting his son's musical talent for financial gain. Starting in 1823, the Liszts toured Europe in much the same way as the Mozarts had done before, exhibiting the child's prodigious talent as a pianist and improviser. Liszt's teacher, Czerny, had protested that the child was too young and

health not sufficiently robust to withstand this lifestyle. In his defence, in order to obtain the best musical training for his son, Adam Liszt had left his home, spent his savings (including his wife's dowry) and ultimately lost his job. The family was living in virtual poverty in Vienna, so when the money finally ran out, this seemed the most logical way to continue Liszt's studies and to avoid complete ruin. Adam Liszt always denied any charge of exploitation saying that without an income all hope of a future in music for his son would be over.

In the early nineteenth century, concert managers, promoters and agents were yet to evolve so Adam Liszt had a full-time job using every contact he could think of in order to arrange and advertise Liszt's appearances. Along with (pre-railroad) transport arrangements, accommodation and practice facilities this was a strenuous and risky undertaking – not one consistent with pure exploitation. Adam Liszt was obsessed by money, but as a former bookkeeper, who at times had almost had to beg in order to feed his family, it is not surprising that his money-management regime was strict.<sup>1</sup> The responsibility for being the principal breadwinner of his family from such an early age, combined with the need to live up to his father's expectations of his talent, must have put severe pressure on the child.

On the positive side, without the money to finance the family's residence in Vienna and Paris, they probably would have needed to return to Hungary; without the musical education Liszt received as a child, he could not have had such a significant career as an adult; without the early experiences of performance he may not have developed into the consummate professional he became.

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<sup>1</sup> Walker, *Franz Liszt*, Vol. 1, pp. 87 ff.

### **Marie d'Agoult**

Following a visit to Milan, Liszt and Marie were in Venice when news of the Pest floods arrived and Liszt left immediately to play concerts in aid of the victims. His trip was so successful that it was extended and at the same time Marie became unwell. Her memoirs, published in 1927, accuse him of seeking public acclaim rather than being devoted to either the charitable cause or to her. His letters to her at this time certainly tell of the applause he received and compare his reception favourably with other pianists such as Thalberg and Clara Wieck. It would appear that Marie has chosen to interpret these letters as seeking and relishing such applause, perhaps due to her being ill:

There was an enthusiasm of which you can have no idea. Without any doubt I shall have an overwhelming success on Wednesday morning. (13<sup>th</sup> April 1838)<sup>2</sup>

Thalberg hardly exists at present in the memory of the Viennese. I am truly moved. Never have I had such a success, or one that can be compared with it. It would have pleased you. (18<sup>th</sup> April 1838)<sup>3</sup>

You know that I am by no means inclined to exaggerate the effect I produce, but here there is a *furore*, a mania of which you can form no idea. (23<sup>rd</sup> April 1838)<sup>4</sup>

Another letter written to her shortly afterwards seems to express his feelings rather than just relating events:

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<sup>2</sup> Liszt, *Selected Letters*, p. 84.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

Never have I so suffered from all my lonely follies as during this past week. To have to endure the din and bustle of Fame (as it is called), constantly to be the cynosure of a thousand eyes – it all makes me feel even more bitterly the absolute isolation of my heart. Why did I not leave during the first few days? Or, rather, what made me decide to come here at all? (May 1838)<sup>5</sup>

In a letter to Therese von Bacheracht a few years later, Liszt's views on his celebrity status are expressed rather more directly, and could well indicate that Marie had actually misinterpreted his earlier accounts: 'A plague on the brouhaha of my celebrity, which ever compels me to go right when the fancy takes me to go left!' (17<sup>th</sup> July 1845)<sup>6</sup>

During his absence, Liszt asked Marie to complete an essay for the *Gazette Musicale* which was printed under his name. Her polemic was extremely critical of Milan, its opera, and its music audiences and resulted in a backlash from Milan, even death threats towards Liszt. Marie's feelings were recorded in her journal, and in a letter to Ferdinand Hiller on 20<sup>th</sup> April 1838 she says:

When he went off he left me to finish a letter on La Scala and *la facciade musicale di Milano* in general. So I went to it with a will... When it arrives in the capital of Lombardy I hope that this letter will create a loud oh oh.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 226.

In the light of this evidence, Alan Walker suggests that this could have been a deliberate act of spite, that she was trying to get revenge for his absence and that she was jealous and suspicious of his motives. However, Marie's journal tends to indicate that the sentiments she expressed were her own true impressions of Milan<sup>7</sup> so perhaps rather than trying to strike out at Liszt she was in fact attempting to give a genuine image of Milan as she experienced it.

Liszt never denied that he was responsible for the article. He did invite his anonymous attackers to meet him publicly, face to face, and arranged date time and place, but of course nobody turned up. He then stated 'my intention has never been to offer an outrage to the society of Milan'.<sup>8</sup>

### **Daniel Stern**

Daniel Stern was the pseudonym under which Marie d'Agoult published her literary efforts. In 1846, despite having been advised against publication, she issued her novel *Nélida* in instalments. In this she relates the story of a love affair between an artist and a high-born heiress. The events and locations match closely her life with Liszt, but omitting any reference to good and charitable efforts and depicting instead a search for applause and glory, a dissolute lifestyle, desertion of the heiress and involvement with other women culminating in the realisation that the artist actually had no talent at all.

The story was assumed to be an autobiographical account of Marie's life with Liszt, and the simple Daniel/*Nélida* anagram encourages identification of the author with the

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<sup>7</sup> Walker, *Franz Liszt*, Vol. 1, p. 264.

<sup>8</sup> Ramann, Vol. 2, p. 303.

heroine – Daniel was the couple’s son. Despite the scandal of their relationship, Liszt was still a major celebrity so when the story was printed in book form it became a sensational bestseller and across Europe it coloured public opinion of Liszt. Liszt wrote to Marie in January 1847:

In general, in Paris as in Vienna, in Berlin as in Milan, this novel has been taken as an attack on my poor self. ... In Germany, the stupid, pedantic critics hostile to me have seized upon *Nélida* to draw all sorts of conclusions against the sincerity of my feelings and the relative morality of my life...<sup>9</sup>

In her introduction to the first English translation of *Nélida*, Lynn Hoggard suggests that Marie wrote it as some kind of therapy rather than as act of spite against Liszt.<sup>10</sup> She further explains that Marie’s inexperience as a writer may have caused the result to be other than she originally intended.<sup>11</sup> Alan Walker, on the other hand, favours the idea that the book was a deliberate attempt by Marie to portray herself as the romantic, wronged, heroine of a love affair. Liszt told her that:

....so long as I am not mentioned by my full baptismal name and address, I shall always refuse definitely and absolutely to recognise myself in the articles and books whose authors have had the kindness to concern themselves indirectly with my poor person.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Liszt, *Selected Letters*, p. 243.

<sup>10</sup> Marie D’Agoult/Daniel Stern, *Nélida* (State University of New York, 2003), p. xviii.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxi.

<sup>12</sup> Walker. *Franz Liszt*, Vol. 1, pp. 395-401.

The timing of the book's publication in 1846 was unfortunate for Liszt. He had been appointed Kapellmeister in Weimar, but had not yet taken up residence and it must have seemed that to date he had made little or no impact there. Marie did reissue the book in 1866 to coincide with Liszt's stay in Paris for the performance of his *Gran Mass*, the poor performance of which was already earning him press criticism. Either this was to revive the fortunes of the book because she needed money, as a deliberate attempt to discredit Liszt, or, as Alan Walker suggests, a mixture of the two.<sup>13</sup>

Liszt never criticised her openly for the writing of this book. However, when she suggested that she intended to publish her 'Confessions', he did remark that it might be more apt to call it 'Poses and Lies'. In the same letter to Princess Carolyne he comments on a conversation he had just had with Marie and it seems to indicate quite clearly that the whole incident had upset him:

...I put plainly to her for the first time the distinction between the True and the False! Those are big words – but it was necessary to use them, to do my duty.  
... Hand on heart, I believe Right is on my side.<sup>14</sup>

### **Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein**

November 1881 saw the publication of a revised edition of Liszt's book *Des Bohémiens et de leur musique en Hongrie*, a book which had from the outset been controversial. When the book was published, readers were surprised and horrified to find large tracts of anti-Semitic and other racially offensive material had been incorporated which had not been included in the original edition. A furore quickly

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 105 n.

<sup>14</sup> Liszt, *Selected Letters*, p. 651.

spread across Europe and Liszt was not only labelled an anti-Semite, but anti-Hungarian as well. Threats of attack were issued against him by the Association of Jewish Law Students if he set foot in Budapest, and concerts were cancelled for fear of demonstrations and riots. It is worth quoting from Liszt's letter from Budapest to Princess Carolyne (9<sup>th</sup> February 1882):

Here, a short pamphlet entitled *Franz Liszt über die Juden* is stealthily going the rounds. ... As you know, there was something of an uproar about certain passages in our book on the gypsies. The pamphlet ... reproduces the animadversions, censures and curses heaped on me by a part of the race of Israel. The simplest and wisest thing to do, it seems to me, is to keep silent. ... Tell me frankly if I should make any response. If I do, I shall of course entirely avoid making personal remarks about anyone. ... I shall await your reply to help me to make up my mind whether to remain silent or to protest about the hate-filled and perfidious designs very wrongly ascribed to me. They are wholly foreign to my character and my spiritual practices!<sup>15</sup>

The people who knew Liszt refused to believe he could have written in this way, and on 25<sup>th</sup> November 1881 an article in *Fővárosi Lapok* issued an invitation to Liszt or someone else to name the person responsible:

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 874-875.



We would not be at all surprised if someone should come forward to affirm that somebody from the land of Anti-Semitism has smuggled these pages into this book by the good old Liszt.<sup>16</sup>

The preparation of the new edition had been entrusted to Princess Carolyne, and authorship of the additional material has been attributed to her. Her daughter's published remarks, alongside Liszt's mention of 'our' book, do appear to confirm that Carolyne was responsible:

Of course he brushed aside every criticism and correction, and he avoided talking about it with my mother. I believe that she, in her cloistered world, never knew what a wicked trick she had played on him!<sup>17</sup>

The controversy was still raging well over a year later when Liszt finally made a statement in February 1883. His reply does seem to hint that he was not personally responsible for writing the offending sections, but rather than apportion blame elsewhere, he defends himself. He mentions his active support for many talented Jews for half a century, and his many contributions to Jewish charitable concerns throughout Europe. He also points out that the idea of a Jewish homeland was merely being repeated:

I can affirm in good conscience that I do not regard myself as being guilty of any other misdeed than that of having feebly reproduced the argument put

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<sup>16</sup> Walker, Franz Liszt, Vol. 3, p. 407.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 389.

forward by Disraeli (Lord Beaconsfield), George Eliot (Mrs Lewes), and Crémieux, three outstanding Israelites, concerning the Kingdom of Jerusalem.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the huge difficulties caused by the new edition, Liszt never openly declared that Carolyne was responsible - as with Marie d'Agoult's Milanese article, he had trusted her. The fact that it was published in his name meant that he took personal responsibility for the content, and he therefore protected her from all the consequences. Even Wagner in Venice during his last days was sympathetic to Liszt's dilemma. The day before his death in February 1883 he said to Cosima: 'Your father goes to his ruin out of pure chivalry'.<sup>19</sup>

### **Pupils of Liszt**

Liszt's regular masterclasses in Weimar during his later years attracted different types of people eager to cash in on his fame. Carl Lachmund tells how Liszt became a tourist attraction with people hanging around to try and at least catch a glimpse of Liszt. Some of them even managed to obtain an invitation to one of the lessons. Others tried to sneak in uninvited hoping they would not be noticed in the crowd. Liszt was content to welcome invited guests, but if he spotted gatecrashers he would become extremely angry.<sup>20</sup>

Graduates from conservatories, believing they were now ready to study with Liszt, came to play their final examination pieces. However most of these were unable to produce any other pieces and would very quickly drop out. Liszt's view was that they would return home and advertise themselves as 'pupil(s) of Liszt' thus developing

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 408.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 409.

<sup>20</sup> Lachmund, p. 71.

their careers under false pretensions. Liszt called them ‘one-day flies’, and was irritated.<sup>21</sup>

Some of the students who did attend Liszt’s classes regularly were clearly not of professional standard, the most frequently quoted example being Lina Schmalhausen. It is said that one of Liszt’s high-ranking friends or patrons had especially asked him to accept her, and for the most part he treated her patiently, if somewhat patronisingly.<sup>22</sup> Carl Lachmund observes Liszt’s attitude:

... Fräulein Lina Schmalhausen whose playing, though pretentious, was amateurish. The Master did not take her efforts very seriously, and yet seemingly praised her. After she had played, he merely exclaimed ‘Pch!’ as if to say, ‘Now that’s encouraging, for it might have been worse’.<sup>23</sup>

One or two of Liszt’s female pupils tried to gain special favour with him, each one perhaps believing herself to be his ‘favourite’. Again notable amongst these is Lina Schmalhausen. Her diary recording the events surrounding Liszt’s death rails at Cosima (Wagner) for not attending properly to her ailing father and not permitting her (Schmalhausen) access to Liszt to care of him herself. She apparently kept vigil in the garden outside his rooms overnight, watching Cosima covertly through the window.<sup>24</sup> However, Lachmund gives her credit for her attentions to Liszt, particularly by reading to him when his eyesight was failing.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 148.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>24</sup> Lina Schmalhausen, *The Death of Franz Liszt* (Cornell University Press, 2002), pp. 109-110.

<sup>25</sup> Lachmund, p. 321.

## Summary

In public at least, Liszt reacted with dignity to all the mockery and accusations levelled at him throughout his life. It was not his habit to condemn anyone for anything they said or did to try and hurt or disgrace him. Even reading through his correspondence there are very few indications of anger, and he never entered into a war of words with anyone. This seems rather like an emulation of his view of Lamennais, quoted in Chapter 1: ‘Always Christ, always sacrifice for others and the voluntary acceptance of opprobrium, of scorn, of misery and death.’<sup>26</sup>

Eventually, as he became elderly and his health more uncertain, it all began to take its toll. He had developed cataracts so his vision was impaired, a fall had left his mobility compromised, and he was generally less able to continue as before. He began to drink more heavily, something his manservant, Achille, told Carl Lachmund in July 1882:

‘The Master is taking his cognac at more frequent intervals now. Usually he empties a bottle a day, and I have known it to be two, and as much wine with the meals. And now he has taken it into his head that he must have Absinthe.’

This brought to my mind the fact that I had seen him during lessons go to his bedroom and return a moment later wiping his lips.<sup>27</sup>

An undated letter, for which the holograph is missing but which is generally believed to be genuine, is quoted by Alan Walker as summing up Liszt’s feelings towards the end of his life. The letter indicates feelings of depression and disillusionment, but in

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<sup>26</sup> Walker, *Franz Liszt*, Vol. 1, p. 157.

<sup>27</sup> Lachmund, p. 115.

the context of the previous quote, it is possible that Liszt wrote it when influenced by drink:

Everyone is against me. Catholics because they find my church music profane, Protestants because to them my music is Catholic, Freemasons because they think my music is too clerical; to conservatives I am a revolutionary, to the ‘futurists’ an old Jacobin. As for the Italians, in spite of Sgambati, if they support Garibaldi they detest me as a hypocrite, if they are on the side of the Vatican I am accused of bringing the Venusberg into the Church. To Bayreuth I am not a composer but a publicity agent. The Germans reject my music as French, the French as German; to the Austrians I write Gypsy music, to the Hungarians foreign music. And the Jews loathe me, my music and myself, for no reason at all.<sup>28</sup>

Despite his best intentions Liszt was frequently misunderstood, misrepresented and let down, and he finally appears to have lost faith in his ability to enable others to grasp his vision of music. Many of the exaggerations written about him still resonate today and accounts of his profligate lifestyle and his longing for fame and glory have found their way into respected music scholarship. Alan Walker’s three-volume biography of Liszt (Cornell University Press) has done much to disentangle fact from fiction thus allowing a truer portrait to be built up, but Liszt’s reputation still suffers to some extent from items written while he was alive.

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<sup>28</sup> Walker, Franz Liszt, Vol. 3, p. 411.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Putting the Virtue into Virtuosity**

Very little has been written in this thesis about Liszt's virtuoso career, but it is for his pianism that he is primarily remembered. In Liszt's time reading newspapers or journals was the way to keep in touch with events and the only way to hear music was in live performance, so people from Russia to Britain flocked to hear every new sensation, and Liszt was regularly requested to go to America (which he never did). As in modern celebrity culture, Liszt's every move was subject to scrutiny and any report about him, however scandalous, and perhaps even untrue, made good copy for journalists. The extent of his celebrity status can only be compared in more recent times to phenomena such as Elvis Presley or the Beatles.

Liszt's performing career was built around the virtuosity he developed after being inspired by Paganini and he sought to combine these techniques with artistry in a way that differed significantly from his contemporaries. As a performer, he adopted many physical mannerisms more in keeping with the virtuoso showman than with the artistic musician, prompting Schumann to remark that 'if Liszt played behind the scenes, a great deal of poetry would be lost'.<sup>1</sup> It is this visual element of Liszt's performances that has given rise to the numerous cartoons and caricatures that have been produced. These in turn undoubtedly coloured popular perception of Liszt, especially among those who never actually heard him play.

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Kramer, *Musical Meaning* (University of California Press, 2004), p. 71.

Liszt's development of virtuosity as an integral part of pianistic artistry has now been accepted as part of mainstream pianism and has given rise to many later works that form part of the standard repertoire for the instrument. Composers who have adopted these techniques include Ravel (*Gaspard de la Nuit*; *Miroirs*), Debussy (*Preludes*; *Images*), Rachmaninov (*Preludes*; *Etudes Tableaux*) and Scriabin (*Etudes*; *Sonatas*) and the number of recordings of them over many years, as well as of Liszt's own piano compositions, is indicative of the level of acceptance of Lisztian virtuosity.

Liszt also courted scandal through his relationships with women. As a charismatic celebrity he was the subject of many 'kiss and tell' stories, some of which were probably true and some which are demonstrably fictitious. His two long-term relationships both involved him living openly with married women, a situation which outraged polite society and was against the teachings of the Church. In his defence it has to be pointed out that in both cases the women were already estranged from their husbands prior to their involvement with Liszt, and to obtain a divorce was extremely difficult if not impossible at that time. He did not 'put asunder those whom God hath joined'.

This thesis has sought to step back from the conventional view of Liszt by examining the activities he undertook in addition to, and following, his concert career. His enduring legend as one of the greatest pianists in history makes it easy to overlook the fact that he was a relatively young man when he retired from the professional concert platform, and that more than half of his life was devoted to composition, conducting and teaching.

Much of the material presented here is drawn directly from Liszt's own correspondence and from diaries and letters written by those who knew him well. The tenor of Liszt's writing throughout is so consistent, and his attitudes are so well corroborated, and so little contradicted, by the recorded experiences and feelings of his contemporaries that there seems little need to question Liszt's own integrity and motives.

The first chapter attempts to illustrate how a combination of religious faith and feelings of injustice worked together to promote a vision of music as an art that could be used for the benefit of mankind. At the same time, the twin influences of Paganini inspired Liszt's urge to incorporate extreme virtuosity into his music and also reinforced his belief that the performer owed a duty of service as thanks for his God-given talents. It was as a result of Liszt's new approach to pianistic virtuosity that he achieved such success as a performer.

Subsequent chapters have outlined several areas where Liszt was actively involved in trying to fulfil his vision. He supported Wagner both financially and musically, helping to gain appreciation for his music and ultimately amnesty from his exile. It is in part thanks to Liszt that Wagner's dream of the Festspielhaus and the Bayreuth Festival became reality. Although it is futile to speculate whether or not Wagner's music would have endured without Liszt's support, there can be little doubt that Liszt contributed to Wagner's acceptance.

Liszt's relationship with Hungary was discussed in Chapter 3. Regardless of the question of nationality, Liszt was a key figure in promoting music and musical



education there through his fund-raising concerts and his involvement with the establishment of the Conservatory in Pest. He also tried to raise international awareness of Hungarian national identity through his Hungarian Rhapsodies. He was unfortunate in that later research demonstrated that these did not represent the true ethnic music of the country, but Liszt's original intentions were clear.

Chapter 4 looked at Liszt's teaching. With his adoption of the masterclass format, he not only allowed as many students as possible to take advantage of his teaching, but provided opportunities for them to gain experience in playing to an audience, and helped them establish their own reputations as performers. Liszt is rightly credited with the invention of the masterclass, which is of particular value to advanced students and is still widely used today not only by pianists but also by other instrumentalists and singers. The fact that Liszt accepted no payment from anyone sets him apart from most other teachers.

In Chapter 5, some examples were quoted showing how Liszt was not well served by some of those around him. At no time does Liszt appear to pass the blame for any damage to his reputation onto anyone else, and at no time does he retaliate in public when attacked by the press, unless the motives of others were being questioned. In all circumstances he appears to have conducted himself in public with dignity.

The picture that emerges is that of a caring, devout man who, early in his life, developed a vision of the role of music and the musician as art and artist and strove to personify this vision as well as he could. Perhaps the key issue is that he formed this vision *before* his enormous success as a pianist developed, and that the life he led as a

touring performer could not provide scope for him to live in harmony with these ideals. A realisation of this may have contributed to his abandonment of this career in favour of activities through which he felt he was better able to serve the future of music. If this could be shown to be true, then it is Liszt's touring career that was out of character for him rather than his retirement into other musical avenues. This is contrary to the more popular view and could perhaps be developed through further research.

Most of the opportunities Liszt was given during the second half of his life were a direct result of the fame and respect he had earned through his concert career. These opportunities were almost exclusively used for the benefit of others and for the promotion of his vision of the role of music in general. Furthermore, much of it was done without financial reward – an obligation he felt as thanks to God for giving him his talent. He therefore used his virtuosity as a means to instil virtue into his artistic endeavours.

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